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THE TIMES OF INDIA

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INDIA'S LARGEST ENGLISH NEWSPAPER

Delhi high court **chief justice Upadhyay declines former CM Arvind Kejriwal's request to transfer CBI's appeal in excise policy case** to another bench. AAP convener has now moved SC, **P 7**

Italian Kimi Antonelli, 19, drives to maiden victory in Chinese Grand Prix. Becomes **second youngest** to win a GP, after Max Verstappen who won 2016 Spanish GP at 18, **P 16**

Speaker Om Birla writes to political parties over protests, asks their 'leadership' to make special efforts to ensure 'high moral conduct' in House and within Parl complex, **P 9**

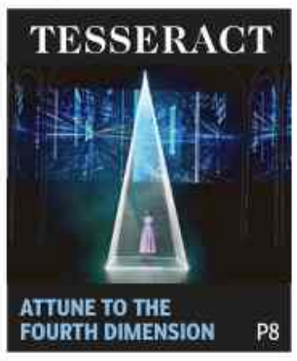
Max Dowman, 16, becomes youngest Premier League scorer with stoppage-time goal in Arsenal's 2-0 win over Everton. Teen dribbled around two Everton players and **raced from halfway line to tap into empty net, P 16**

Bypolls to Bagalkot, Davanagere South to be held on April 9

Byelections to Davanagere South and Bagalkot will be held on April 9 and votes will be counted on May 4. Bypolls have been necessitated after the demise of Cong-ress's Shamanur Shivashankarappa and HY Meti. Internal bickering in Congress and absence of strong candidates have turned the contests into an open race. **P 4**

7 Indian pilgrims die in Nepal bus accident

A bus carrying Indian pilgrims slipped off a mountain road and fell into a gorge in Nepal late Saturday night, killing seven people and leaving nine others injured. The Nepalese bus driver and his assistant were among the injured victims. The pilgrims were returning from Manakamana temple. **P 7**



Infiltration bid foiled in Uri, Pak ultra killed

Army and police foiled an infiltration bid along LoC in J&K's Uri sector, killing a Pakistani terrorist Sunday. An AK rifle, pistols, and cache of ammunition were found. Forces were carrying out extensive searches to ensure no other infiltrators were present. **P 7**

LPG panic booking eases, online orders up after crash

Bookings Down From 89L To 77L

TIMES NEWS NETWORK

New Delhi: The govt's campaign to discourage panic booking of LPG refills seems to have had an impact, with the number of domestic bookings declining from 88.8 lakh on Friday to 77 lakh on Saturday.

The petroleum ministry said online bookings have also increased from 84% to 87%, while no dry-outs were reported at LPG distributors. Online booking had become difficult over the past few days as unusually high call volumes led the system to crash. This led to consumers lining up at gas depots and demanding immediate refills.

Though the availability of LPG amid the conflict in West Asia continues to be a concern, forcing govt to reduce the delivery of commercial cylinders — largely used by small eateries, restaurants and the hospitality industry — to just 20%, the ministry said in a statement that arrangements were in place to maintain regular supply and distribution.

"Steps have been taken to ensure stable availability of petroleum products and LPG across the country. LPG supply continues to be monitored in view of the prevailing geopolitical situation," it said.

▶Six ships stuck, P 5

CBSE CANCELS XII BOARDS IN W ASIA

- **India-flagged tanker Jag Laadki on way to India** with 88,000 tonne of oil after **escaping attack at UAE's Fujairah port Saturday** when it was loading crude
- **22 Indian-flagged vessels with 611 seafarers** remain west of Persian Gulf region
- After Class 10, CBSE cancels Class 12 boards in entire West Asia region, affecting around **20,000 students in 200 schools**

Photo: Anushka Kogta

Students returned from Iran to New Delhi on Sunday

- **Formula One's Bahrain and Saudi Arabian Grands Prix** in April will not take place. **Qatar GP** in April postponed to Nov

Iran Guards: Will pursue and kill Netanyahu

Iran's Revolutionary Guards vowed Sunday to kill Israeli PM Netanyahu . "If this child-killing criminal is alive, we will continue to pursue and kill him with full force," they said on their website, while Netanyahu put up a video making light of social media rumours that he was dead. **INSIDE JACKET**

Menus shrink, footfall dips, hotel biz falls 30%

A week after LPG supply was disrupted, hotels in Bengaluru have suffered up ro 30% losses, **report Hamsaveni N & Vindhya Pabolu**. With gas supply still inadequate, eateries have cut down menus, stopped serving items and reduced operating hours. **P 2**

AIIMS starts protocol to conduct India's 1st passive euthanasia

Rana Shifted To Palliative Care Unit Of Hospital

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New Delhi: Thirty-two-year-old Harish Rana was shifted to AIIMS Saturday and put under a specialised medical team for passive euthanasia. He is being kept at palliative care unit at AIIMs' Institute Rotary Cancer Hospital.

On March 11, Supreme Court upheld Rana's right to die with dignity, allowing removal of clinically assisted nutrition & hydration. He has been in a vegetative state since 2013, after a fall from 4th floor of his PG accommodation left him with severe head injuries and 100% quadriplegic disability. He was a student at Panjab University.

Hospital sources said Rana will be under palliative care specialists and other doctors who'll follow established medical and legal protocol for passive euthanasia.

▶Relieving symptoms, P 6

FOCUS ON PAIN RELIEF

- Passive euthanasia involves **withholding or withdrawing life-sustaining treatment** while ensuring adequate pain relief and supportive care
- Plans are patient-specific, addressing **psychological, physical and social needs.** Condition is periodically assessed, treatment adjusted
- Duration **varies from days to weeks**, per patient's state

In Jan-Feb 2026, ₹19.6L/day lost to digital-arrest scams in K'taka

Bengaluru: Despite sustained awareness campaigns by Centre, probe agencies, state police, IT department and media, Karnataka has lost Rs 11.6 crore to digital-arrest fraud in just the first 59 days of 2026 — averaging Rs 19.6 lakh every single day, **reports Chethan Kumar.**

Of this, only Rs 25.2 lakh — or, a meagre 2.2% — has been recovered so far, according to data from Karnataka home department. Between Jan 2023 and Feb 2026, digital-arrest cases have extorted more than Rs 468.6 crore from victims.

Official figures for March 2026 are yet to be compiled, but individual cases are already piling up.

▶ Woman threatened with shooting, loses ₹38L, P 3

▶Criminals raise stakes, P 3

4 held for trying to bribe 8 Odisha MLAs; DKS alleges 'Op Lotus'

HM Chaithanya Swamy, Sanjay Murty & Debabrata Mohapatra

Bengaluru/Bhubaneswar: Bengaluru police Sunday arrested four men for allegedly attempting to bribe eight Congress MLAs from Odisha with Rs 5 crore each to vote for BJP in Rajya Sabha polls Monday. Alleging 'Operation Lotus', Karnataka deputy CM D K Shivakumar said, "Four men tried to influence our Odisha MLAs in a hotel by offering them Rs 5 crore each, to cross-vote."

BJP spokesperson Anil Biswal said, "Since Congress is staring at defeat, they are making allegations."

Bengaluru South SP R Srinivas Gowda confirmed the arrest of two persons. A police officer said the duo was from BJP and has been identified as Birendra Prasad from Odisha and Byatarayanapura Suresh from Bengaluru. A complaint was filed by Ashok Kumar Das, Congress leader in Odisha.

▶Political storm, P 4

OFFERED ₹5CR EACH FOR CROSS-VOTING: DKS

- **Four men allegedly tried to offer Rs 5cr each to 8 Odisha Congress MLAs** to secure cross-voting in March 16 Rajya Sabha election
- Complainant alleges the four men **threatened to kill the legislators** when they rejected their offer
- **2 from BJP held from resort** — one from Odisha & another from B'luru. **2 others on the run were held late Sunday night**
- Odisha **MLAs were moved to resort** Wonderla Bengaluru, near Bidadi, on March 12 **to prevent defections** ahead of poll

Farmhouse drug bust: AP's TDP MP tests +ve for meth

Hyderabad: Andhra Pradesh's sitting TDP MP Putta Mahesh Kumar tested positive Sunday for banned substance methamphetamine (meth) in a blood test ordered after what investigators allege was an attempt to dodge a drug screening at a farmhouse party raided by Hyderabad Police the previous night, **reports Srinath Vudali.**

The Eluru MP's test result took the number of high-profile guests failing drug checks at Moinabad property to six out of 11.

▶ 'Faked' drug test, P 14

36 years on, ₹500 bribery case ends with 1-yr jail term

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New Delhi: It took a trial court 16 years, Uttarakhand High Court six years and Supreme Court 14 years to decide a bribery case of Rs 500 involving an excise official. The case finally achieved closure with the SC upholding the man's conviction and awarding one-year jail term.

The matter started in June 1990 when the official was caught red-handed while accepting a bribe of Rs 500 and a case was registered against him under the Prevention of Corruption Act. A trial court convicted him in March 2006 and sentenced him to two years' imprisonment and a fine of Rs 2,000 for the offence under Section 13(2) of PC Act for criminal misconduct.

▶Cites convict's age, P 14

76 yrs on, HC settles fight over 1-acre land

In what began as a family battle over properties in Pune in 1950 and saw several twists and turns, Bombay HC has directed the partitioning of a one-acre plot of land in Yerawada among the heirs of the land owner, MMH Janmohamed. **P 6**

Didi races poll clock on DA sops, priests' payouts

Kolkata: Bengal CM Mamata Banerjee said Sunday her govt would pay Rs 10,000cr in DA arrears to 9 lakh state employees and pensioners from March and hike monthly honorarium for Hindu priests and Muslim muezzins by Rs 500 to Rs 2,000.

She made clergy honorarium hike on her official X handle at 2.40pm and DA arrears at 3.05pm, 55 minutes before EC presser on poll dates. Meanwhile, hours after model code took effect, EC replaced state chief secretary & home secretary. TNN

▶Poll drama: BJP, P 9

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- **Mr. Ratan Naval Tata,** Chairman Emeritus, Tata Sons **(2021)**
- **Dr. Ary S Graça** President-International Volleyball Federation (FIVB) **(2020)**
- **Dr. Dansa KOUROUMA** President, National Transition Council of Guinea, **Guinea (2019)**
- **Professor Muhammad Yunus** (Nobel Laureate) Founder, Grameen Bank, **Bangladesh (2018)**
- **His Holiness The 14th Dalai Lama** Nobel Laureate, 2005 and Spiritual Leader **(2017)**
- **Ms. Ashley Judd,** Hollywood Actor, Activist & Global Goodwill Ambassador, **UNFPA (2016)**

16th March 2026

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The KISS Humanitarian Award is a prestigious annual international award conferred by the Kalinga Institute of Social Sciences (KISS) in Bhubaneswar, India, conceptualized and the brainchild of visionary humanitarian and educationist Prof. Achyuta Samanta, Founder of KIIT, KISS & KIMS. The award was initiated in 2008 to recognize and felicitate individuals for their exemplary and distinguished service to humanity across the globe.

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LOW ON GAS, EATERIES FIND ALTERNATIVES TO COOK LIMITED ITEMS WHILE PG OCCUPANTS DEPEND ON PACKAGED FOOD

Menus shrink, footfall drops: LPG crisis sees hotel biz decline 30%

Hamsaveni N & Vindhya Pabolu | TNN

Bengaluru: Nearly a week after LPG shortage hit the food and beverages sector, hotels and restaurants across the city said their business has dropped by about 30%. With commercial LPG supply still inadequate, eateries have cut down menus, stopped serving items such as fried kebabs and snacks, and reduced operating hours.

Meanwhile, paying guest accommodations, hostels, and apartment complexes have also issued advisories warning residents of simpler meals or possible food disruptions.

According to Bengaluru Hotels' Association, on average, hotels and darshinis have suffered 25% to 30% losses. Subramanya Holla, president of the association, told **TOI**: "LPG shortage has badly hit our operations as we still continue with limited supply. But it makes me surprised and happy to see how our eateries have found alternatives to cook food and ensured that their kitchens keep running. Most of the big hotels and restaurants are using firewood to cook, and others are managing with limited stock." However, many eateries also said they cannot shift to firewood because of a lack of space.

With many popular dishes temporarily off the menu, eateries on Sunday told **TOI** that customer footfall has dropped noticeably. "We usually need four LPG cylinders a day for our branch, but now we have cut it down to three. We have no sambar and saagu as they require constant reheating and tend to spoil quickly in the heat. We usually get about 1,000 customers on weekdays and around 1,500 on weekends, but footfall has gone down. This Sunday alone, we saw at least 300 fewer customers. We don't know when we can bring back the full menu as it depends on LPG supply. Our cylinders come from Adugodi for all branches," said the manager of IDC Tiffin Centre in JP Nagar 5th Phase.

Pics: TOI

NAVIGATING CRISIS: A restaurant at Chitrakala Parishat has switched to firewood to prepare chapatis after LPG supplies were disrupted; many eateries are putting up notices stating their menus have been trimmed for now

> On average, hotels and darshinis have suffered 25% to 30% losses. But it makes me surprised and happy to see how our eateries have found alternatives to cook food and ensured that their kitchens keep running. Most of the big hotels and restaurants are using firewood to cook, and others are managing with limited LPG stock
>
> **Subramanya Holla** | PRESIDENT, BENGALURU HOTELS' ASSOCIATION

NO DOSE? NO KITCHEN

While almost all eateries and restaurants have trimmed their menus, they continue to keep the dose going despite it requiring a lot of gas to heat the tawa. Just to keep the dose on the menu, hoteliers have stopped other items like North Indian meals, idli, sambar, and a few fried items, including poori, bonda, and pakodas.

Most of the eatery owners **TOI** spoke to said dose is one of the major attractions and a very fast-moving dish across all restaurants in Bengaluru; if dose is stopped, the kitchen is stopped, they said.

The iconic dose spot Vidyarthi Bhavan, which has cut down its menu and announced changes in its dining timings, promised that it would continue to serve its famous masala dose to customers. However, in a social media post on Sunday, the eatery shifted its evening dining timing from 2.30pm–8pm to 4.30pm–8.30pm.

Supply prices up

A Donne Biryani joint owner, who has been running three stores since 2020, said: "Today is probably the last day we can manage with LPG as we are almost out of it. Our local supplier has also hiked prices due to high demand, so we are still figuring out what to do. To save gas, we have stopped selling deep-fried items like kebabs over the past four days since they require oil to stay hot constantly. We are now sticking to rice items and curries that can be reheated easily. Because many favourite items are off the menu, customer footfall has dropped and we are seeing nearly 30% losses."

Another darshini owner, from Jayanagar 4th Block, said: "At present, we are charging Rs 10 for extra sambar and curry (saagu) to cope with the high LPG prices, as we cannot increase the price of the dishes. We cannot make fresh sambar repeatedly or keep reheating it continuously to save gas. So, to accommodate everyone and sell it faster, we are doing this."

The manager at a KFC branch told **TOI**: "Our branch sees more than 300 transactions every day and we need at least four cylinders daily. We usually purchase cylinders on a monthly basis, so for the next week, we are in the safe zone. But looking at the crisis, we are planning whether to adopt measures to save LPG. We will observe the situation for another week, and if the situation does not ease up, we may shift a majority of the menu from fried to grilled items. But because news of the crisis is spreading, footfall is down by 10–20% as some customers are under the impression that nothing is available."

CM urges Centre to address LPG shortage

Bengaluru: Chief minister Siddaramaiah Sunday urged Union minister Hardeep Singh Puri to quickly take the steps he has promised to ensure there is no disruption in LPG supply. Speaking to reporters here, the CM said the state govt has written to the Centre urging it to explore alternatives such as importing gas from abroad to address the shortage. Siddaramaiah said the issue was also raised in the legislature and the govt is cognisant of the impact on people who depend on hotels for food. Responding to BJP's criticism of alleged mismanagement, he said BJP leaders should ensure higher LPG supply instead of passing comments.

WEST ASIA CRISIS

CBSE cancels board exams across Gulf

Mangaluru: The West Asia crisis has disrupted the CBSE board examinations across Gulf countries, leaving thousands of Indian students and their families worried about how results will now be declared.

The CBSE said in a circular issued on Sunday that all class 12 board exams— scheduled between March 16 and April 10, 2026 — for students in Bahrain, Iran, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE have been cancelled. The board also cancelled the remaining class 10 exams in these countries. However, CBSE has not yet announced how the class 10 and 12 results will be evaluated.

Parents and students have urged CBSE not to rely on pre-board marks for evaluation. Sarvotham Shetty, board of governor of Abu Dhabi Indian School, said the main concern was the absence of any clear direction on how marks will be awarded and what process will be followed after the cancellation.

The uncertainty was also reflected online. One user, Aashish Tulsaan, said the results were crucial for university admissions and called for a fair and transparent evaluation process.

963 applications for 369 wards: Congress

Times News Network

Bengaluru: Ahead of the elections to the five newly formed city corporations, the Congress party reported receiving 963 applications across 369 wards. However, the party had no applicants in 45 wards as of Sunday.

The Karnataka Pradesh Congress Committee (KPCC) organised a meeting of the aspirants to the city corporation councils Sunday, which was attended by KPCC president DK Shivakumar and the Bengaluru district Congress leadership.

Shivakumar gave the aspirants 15 days to verify voter lists at each booth level if they wanted the party's ticket. "If you are not verifying the draft voter list by visiting each house, you are not prepared for the polls," he said, directing Congress workers to look for discrepancies in voter lists ahead of the Special Intensive Revision (SIR).

The city corporations are currently in the process of mapping the voter lists, while the state election commission (SEC) has released the draft voter list.

"SIR is a big danger. Voters need to submit applications to retain their voting rights. This is anti-democratic. Even the courts didn't value Mamata Banerjee's pleas against SIR, though she herself argued in court," he said. Shivakumar also said he was not satisfied with the ward-wise reservation formula.

He also urged the applicants to highlight the impact of the Congress govt's five guarantee schemes.

2 new corporations to be formed: DKS

DK Shivakumar announced plans to form two more city corporations or merge some areas amongst the corporations. "Some areas of Byatarayanapura in north Bengaluru and some areas near Whitefield and E-City may be carved into two new corporations. We will be discussing this plan over the next two days with MLAs," he said. He clarified this plan will not interfere with the upcoming GBA polls.

SIR is Special Intensive Rigging, says ex-MP

Former Rajya Sabha MP MV Rajeev Gowda said the SIR should be understood as Special Intensive Rigging. "SIR needs all voters added after 2002 to prove their documents and residential status. We need to handle this carefully," he said, urging applicants to undertake 'Ward Padayatra' and come out with ward-level manifestos.

Congress leaders urged workers to take note of the recent social media trends wherein videos of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's past speeches on gas from open drains powering tea stalls went viral. "The BJP has been trolling Rahul Gandhi for over a decade. This is our opportunity to teach them a lesson. We must use these trends to our advantage by sharing such posts widely," Congress MLC DT Srinivas said.

Crackdown on illegal LPG use & storage

Times News Network

Bengaluru/Kolar: Authorities have launched a crackdown on illegal refilling of LPG and unsafe storage of cylinders in Bengaluru and Kolar, following reports of a shortage of domestic gas cylinders.

IN B'LURU, KOLAR

Food inspectors, along with local police, conducted multiple raids and registered cases against those allegedly involved in hoarding, illegally selling, and storing LPG cylinders. Raids were carried out in the Chikkajala, Kengeri, and Peenya police limits.

In one case, police raided Mahalakshmi Enterprises in Mylasandra on Saturday. Mahantagowda Tadligi, food inspector for Bengaluru South, said officials found owner Mangaram — now remanded in judicial custody — storing LPG cylinders belonging to different companies and selling them at inflated rates. Fifteen cylinders were seized.

In another raid, on Friday, officials inspected Vinayaka Gas Agency in Chokkasandra. Food inspector Prasanna Kumar, along with Peenya police, found that owner Janardhan, who has since been arrested, had stored around 45 cylinders without safety measures or a valid licence, and was selling them at higher prices.

In the third case, Savitha Unki, food inspector from Yelahanka, along with Yelahanka police, raided Annapoorna Enterprises on Friday. Owner Kumaraswamy, also arrested, had allegedly stored 209 empty cylinders of different companies without safety measures or a valid licence.

All cases have been registered under the Essential Commodities Act, the LPG (Supply and Distribution) Control Order, and Section 318 (cheating) of BNS.

Domestic cylinder misuse

Meanwhile, in Kolar, officials inspected eateries to check the misuse of domestic LPG cylinders. During a raid by the food department, city municipal council, and the tahsildar's office in Bangarpet, 22 domestic cylinders were seized from nine eateries, where they were being used for commercial cooking.

(With inputs from Ranganath K)

Fewer burners and longer waits: Gas quandary hits students, PG boarders

Vindhya Pabolu & Hamsaveni N | TNN

Bengaluru: As the commercial LPG shortage continues to disrupt kitchens across Bengaluru, the impact is increasingly being felt by those who depend on eateries for their daily meals. Migrant workers, students, and professionals staying in paying guest accommodations or rented homes without kitchens say the crisis has left them with fewer food choices and longer waiting times at many hotels and darshinis.

Several small eateries that cater to this population have either reduced their menus or adjusted prices for certain items as they try to stretch the limited LPG stock available to them.

For residents who cannot cook where they stay, the disruption has meant adjusting their routine. While some say they are managing with whatever food is available, others are increasingly relying on instant food items or quick snacks.

Athul Krishna PS, who was visiting a friend in Bengaluru, said, "I was looking for a place at Indiranagar for lunch and Google showed that a place was open, but when we went there, it was completely shut. Then we visited Paragon Saturday evening, but it had already been closed by 10pm. Later, Sunday afternoon, when we visited Paragon, we were given a temporary menu with limited items, which did not have their normal chicken and mutton biryani, but only a few special biryanis. Sunday morning, when we went out to get some breakfast, the darshini we visited was closed and most of the hotels near Garudacharpalya were shut. Then we ended up eating at one of the smaller roadside places. We were aware of the crisis, so we just managed with whatever we could get."

Chethan Shivakumar

HIGH DEMAND, LOW SUPPLY: LPG crisis is forcing many people to manage with whatever food is available or rely on packed items

Abel Philip, a student, who stays in a rented flat, said, "I don't have a kitchen in my room to cook, so I mostly eat outside. While I did not notice much of a change in prices, I noticed a limited menu and I also observed delays in food being served. I go to a darshini regularly and initially they used two burners, but now I am noticing that only one burner is being used; hence, there is a delay in food being served."

Two working professionals from the Richmond Road area also told **TOI** that they depend on hotels for food. "The coffee and tea prices went up by Rs 2 at one of the regular places we go to. This increase will indeed hit the pockets of students who mainly depend on money sent by parents. We also observed that most of the hotels stopped making items like porotta, chapati, and kebabs and are mostly serving rice items. We also noticed that a few hotels in our area seemed to be shut for the past 2-3 days."

Sai Kiran, from Bannerghatta Road, said, "Since it was Saturday, we planned to go out to our favourite food place to enjoy hot fried snacks. But we were disappointed when they stopped serving them because of this LPG problem."

Pranay P, who is currently staying in a PG in Marathahalli, said, "Because of this crisis, the hostel menu is cut down and now only upma and dal are offered. So, to have a nice time with friends, we went to a restaurant in Whitefield. But we were really disappointed when the owner said most meals were unavailable and almost all dishes were over due to the LPG shortage. In the end, we had to settle for some ordinary noodles."

'Astrologer' held for cheating I-T officer

Times News Network

Bengaluru: The roadside parrot astrologer who allegedly cheated an income tax officer on the pretext of performing special rituals to improve his personal life and career has landed in police custody.

The accused has been identified as **Shekar**, 59, a native of Periyakulam in Tamil Nadu's Theni district. **TOI** was the first to report on the incident on March 10.

A senior officer said Shekar cheated the I-T officer of gold and silver ornaments worth over Rs 31 lakh, and Rs 50,000 in cash, between Dec 25, 2025 and March 4, 2026. Ramesh (name changed), working as an administrative officer at the I-T department's Koramangala office, filed a complaint on March 5.

In Dec 2025, when Ramesh was passing through Shree Circle on St John's Road in Bharathinagar, Shekar, who was sitting by the roadside, introduced himself as a parrot astrologer and claimed he could predict the future by looking at a person's face. Ramesh asked him to read his horoscope. Shekar told him that he was facing a new problem and collected Rs 50,000 to perform a special puja.

Accused took 194g gold and 1.3kg silver ornaments

Days later, Shekar claimed that a bigger and more powerful ritual was required for better career prospects, promotions, and overall prosperity. Though Ramesh initially refused, the man allegedly continued to call him almost every day, pressuring and even threatening him that his life would face difficulties if the ritual was not performed.

Ramesh later approached Shekar about his transfer proposal pending in the office. Shekar then collected 194 grams of gold and 1.3kg of silver ornaments, promising to return them after performing the puja. However, he allegedly cheated him. Police said efforts are on to recover the ornaments.

YOU READ IT FIRST IN TOI

I-T officer falls for astrologer's parroted promise,

Man has car silencer stolen, wins ₹15k relief after insurers break promise

Vindhya.Pabolu @timesofindia.com

Bengaluru: After his car's silencer was stolen, a Vivek-nagar resident faced a prolonged struggle to get his insurance claim processed before finally securing relief from the consumer commission. After the insurer rejected the claim, saying it was not processed as per policy conditions, he approached the Bengaluru Urban district consumer disputes redressal commission, which has now ordered reimbursement of the full amount.

The saga began when JK Vijayanandan purchased a car from Suraksha Car Care Pvt Ltd, Hosur Main Road, on March 6, 2021. The vehicle was insured through Maruti Suzuki Insurance Broking Pvt Ltd, which had a tie-up with HDFC ERGO General Insurance Company Ltd. The policy was issued on March 4, 2023, and remained valid till Feb 28, 2024.

Vijayanandan alleged that on July 12, 2023, the silencer of his vehicle, valued at Rs 90,000, was stolen. Subsequently, he left the vehicle with Suraksha Car Care for repairs and sought reimbursement of the repair expenses from the insurer. Despite the complainant submitting the claim and necessary documents, the amount was not settled. On Sept 24, 2024, he filed a consumer case alleging deficiency in service.

However, the insurer later proposed a settlement. In an email dated Nov 5, 2025, both the insurance companies offered to settle the complaint by paying Rs 75,007 towards the repair cost, along with Rs 10,000 towards litigation expenses. The proposal was accepted by Vijayanandan via an email dated Feb 4, 2026.

However, he later filed a memo on Feb 20, 2026, alleging that while the repair cost was addressed, the agreed Rs 10,000 as an additional amount was not paid, forcing him to repeatedly approach the commission.

Vijayanandan stated that the theft occurred during the subsistence of the insurance policy and that he had duly informed the service centre and insurer about the incident. However, the claim remained unsettled for months, causing financial loss and mental distress.

In their defence, Suraksha Car Care Pvt Ltd, Maruti Suzuki Insurance Broking Pvt Ltd, and HDFC ERGO General Insurance Company Ltd contended that the claim had to undergo verification and assessment as per the policy terms. They also denied any negligence or deliberate delay.

The commission noted that the insurance companies had failed to pay the agreed-upon settlement even after repeated follow-ups. It added that since the proposal came only after the complaint was filed, it amounted to deficiency in service. The bench, comprising president Shivarama K and members Chandrashekar S Noola and Rekha Sayannavar, in its Feb 27 order, directed the opposite parties to pay the complainant Rs 10,000 with 9% interest from Nov 5, 2025, along with Rs 5,000 towards litigation costs.

Too hot to handle! Rising UV levels lead to spike in skin and eye issues

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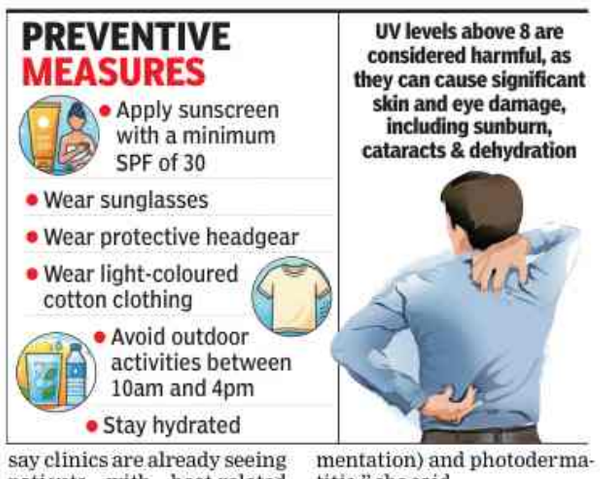
Bengaluru: With the ultraviolet (UV) index in the city touching an extreme level of 13 this year, doctors are urging residents to take precautions against prolonged sun exposure, warning that intense UV radiation can cause both immediate and long-term health problems.

UV levels above 8 are considered harmful, as they can cause significant skin and eye damage, including sunburn, cataracts, and dehydration.

Explaining the unusual spike, Dr Balakrishna GK, HOD and senior consultant, internal medicine, Gleneagles BGS Hospital, Kengeri, said, "As Bengaluru is at an elevation, we are closer to sun exposure too. While in peak summer, the UV index usually reaches around 12, this year it is already at 13, and anything beyond 12 is considered very serious. If not careful, one can even lose eyesight or suffer serious metabolic issues or heat syncope."



Dermatologists in the city say clinics are already seeing patients with heat-related skin problems. Dr Safia Tanyeem, consultant dermatologist at Apollo Medical Centre, said acute exposure to UV rays can cause several immediate skin conditions. "The acute effects on the skin include sunburn, itching, redness, oozing lesions, and even allergic reactions. UV exposure can also lead to tanning and aggravate conditions such as photomelanosis (hyperpigmentation) and photodermatitis," she said.

"In the long run, it can speed up the ageing process by increasing wrinkles and fine lines, and aggravate melasma and freckles. While it is not very common, there is also a possibility of skin cancer due to increased UV exposure," she said, adding that patients started visiting clinics as early as the second half of Feb.

Eye specialists also warn that UV radiation can affect vision, both in the short and long term. Dr Preethi V, medical superintendent at Nethradhama Super Speciality Eye Hospital, Yelahanka, explained that short-term exposure to intense UV rays can lead to conditions such as photokeratitis and photoconjunctivitis. "These can occur even after brief exposure and cause symptoms like redness, light sensitivity, grittiness, and the sensation of a foreign body in the eye," she said.

Prolonged exposure to UV radiation can lead to more serious eye problems, including pterygium (tissue growth over the cornea), pinguecula (conjunctival bumps), corneal degeneration, and accelerated cataract formation. "Chronic exposure can also damage the retina and increase the risk of age-related macular degeneration. Direct sungazing can burn the retina and cause solar retinopathy. Long-term exposure can even lead to eyelid cancers such as basal or squamous cell carcinoma," she added.

Crooks threaten woman with shooting hoax, swindle ₹38L

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Scammers told her to transfer ₹38 lakh as part of 'standard procedure'. As the woman said she was unwell, they threatened to freeze her bank accounts, seize her property and arrest her immediately. Fearing the consequences, she agreed to cooperate

#DontGetScammed
Gift TOI to your loved ones and protect them from scams.
Call 85 95 124 124

Bengaluru: In a chilling case of cyberfraud, a woman was threatened with arrest and even a possible shooting by "national security officials", before being coerced into transferring Rs 38 lakh under the pretext of a "digital arrest".

According to a complaint filed by Rathna (name changed), a homemaker residing at Indiranagar, her ordeal began around 3pm on March 11, when she received a call from +91 9505281348. The callers claimed her documents had been misused in money laundering and pornography frauds. When Rathna expressed shock and pleaded innocence, the fraudsters told her that a bank account had been opened in her name in Mumbai, through which funds were "routed to terrorists".

The fraudsters told her that her life was under threat and that she needed to confirm to them that she was safe once every two hours. They claimed that they were there to protect her and save her from arrest. One of the callers claimed that he was from a national security agency and told her that she had to be inquired into. Soon after, the fraudsters initiated a WhatsApp video call from another number in which they told her that police would arrest her soon and that "some people might shoot her as well."

The fraudsters then placed her under what they called a "standard protocol", instructing her to stay on their call and avoid contacting anyone for 72 hours. Subsequently, they shared a few documents referring to "financial transactions" under the "Directorate of Enforcement" lens and collected her bank details, including the balance.

To "verify" her finances and "clear her name", they forced her to transfer Rs 38 lakh, saying it was a standard procedure of the RBI. They told her that the amount would be returned within 24 hours of the verification. The next day (March 12), around 3pm, Rathna told them she was unwell and could not continue the calls. The fraudsters intensified the pressure, threatening to freeze her bank accounts, seize her property, and arrest her immediately.

Fearing the consequences, she agreed to cooperate. The fraudsters instructed her to go to her bank and transfer Rs 38 lakh to a current account in a private bank in the name of Sharvi Infotel Pvt Ltd. They warned her not to talk to anyone in the bank or inform them of the ongoing "investigation".

Only after transferring the money did she realise that she had fallen prey to an elaborate cyber scam and approached police the same night to lodge a complaint.

A senior officer said efforts are on to recover the lost money.

AS OFFICIALS TAKE ACTION, CRIMINALS RAISE STAKES

▶ Continued from page 1

The piling up of cases signals that the year's tally could far exceed early projections. The figures are a grim reminder that even as authorities ramp up outreach, cybercriminals are not only keeping pace, they are also raising the stakes.

A case that highlights the audacity of these fraudsters: On March 8, a 94-year-old research scholar filed a complaint after losing nearly Rs 5 crore to a digital-arrest scam. A look at Karnataka's digital arrest data over the past three years reveals a volatile but persistently damaging trend. In 2023, when the crime was still gaining traction among cybercriminals, 196 cases accounted for Rs 22.5 crore in losses, with Rs 2.3 crore recovered.

HOW VICTIMS' MONEY VANISHED IN THIN AIR

Year	Cases	Amount lost	Amount recovered
2026*	25	₹11.6 cr	₹25 lakh
2025	345	₹215.1 cr	₹10.6 cr
2024	1,129	₹219.4 cr	₹27.8 cr
2023	196	₹22.5 cr	₹2.3 cr
Total	1,695	₹468.6 cr	₹41 cr

Source: Home Dept | Up to Feb 2026 | Figures Rounded Off

In 2024, as many as 1,129 cases were registered, with victims losing Rs 219.4 crore — the highest case on record. Recovery stood at Rs 27.8 crore, or roughly 13%. In 2025, the number of cases dropped sharply to 345, yet the total loss remained nearly comparable at Rs 215.1 crore, with only Rs 10.7 crore — about 5% — recovered.

What the numbers also reveal is a shift in the nature of attacks. Criminals appear to be targeting fewer victims but extracting far larger sums. The average loss per case was Rs 19.4 lakh in 2024. In 2025, that figure jumped to Rs 62.3 lakh. In 2026, with just 25 cases so far, the per-case average already stands at Rs 46.3 lakh — a number expected to climb as the year progresses.

Home minister G Parameshwara recently told the state legislature that the govt had issued orders for speedy investigation of all cybercrime cases. "Cybercrime cops across the state have been instructed to remain vigilant. We have established a separate cyber command with a DG, and set up the Centre for Cybercrime Investigation and Digital Forensic Training and Research at the CID office," Parameshwara said.

Woman, married for 16 months, found dead in Yelahanka

TIMES NEWS NETWORK

Bengaluru: A 22-year-old homemaker allegedly died by suicide over a marital row in Yelahanka Saturday afternoon, triggering allegations of dowry harassment.

The deceased has been identified as Shruthi. Her husband Pawan Kalyan, a private bank employee, found her hanging in a room in their house. He untied the noose and rushed her to a nearby hospital, where doctors declared her dead on arrival.

DOWRY CLAIMS

Shruthi and Kalyan, who are relatives, are natives of Pavagada taluk in Tumakuru district. Married 16 months ago, the couple lived in a rented house in Yelahanka. According to Shruthi's family, the couple had disputes. However, both families had reportedly intervened recently, asking them to resolve differences and continue living together.

Kalyan told police that he had stepped out briefly and, on returning, found Shruthi hanging. However, according to Shruthi's father, their daughter had been harassed over dowry by her husband and in-laws. The family claimed the harassment had been ongoing for several months and had driven her to take the extreme step.

Based on the complaint, Yelahanka New Town police station has registered a case of dowry death and is questioning Kalyan.

If you are having suicidal thoughts or are need emotional support, call suicide prevention helplines: Tele-MANAS: 14416 or 1800-891-4416, SAHAI: 080-25497777.

Leopard killed in accident

TIMES NEWS NETWORK

Bengaluru: A female leopard was killed in a suspected road accident on the NICE Road near Anjanapura lake junction between Karnataka State Sericulture Research and Development Institute and Bannerghatta early Sunday.

ON NICE ROAD

The accident is believed to have occurred between 1am and 1.15am, according to forest officials. Range forest officer (RFO) of Kaggalipura, N Kamble, said that the deceased leopard was a female aged between two and three years.

Forest department officials suspect the leopard may have strayed onto NICE Road from the nearby Khodays property on Kanakapura Road. "We received information about the incident around 1.50am. By the time we were alerted, a group of volunteers from an organisation, NICE Road patrol staff, and police had already reached the spot," Kamble said.

As forest officials were on their way to the location, police informed them that a large crowd had begun gathering, creating traffic congestion. To disperse the crowd and ensure smooth movement of vehicles, the leopard's body was shifted immediately from the spot. The animal was later brought to the Kaggalipura range office, after which forest officials visited the accident site for examination. Officials said the vehicle involved in the accident remains unidentified.

UGADI SHOPPING IN CITY

PTI

FESTIVAL ON ITS WAY: People throng KR Market ahead of Ugadi on Sunday. The traditional new year will be celebrated on March 19

Signal fault halts Metro trains, sparks crowding

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@BENNIGANAHALLI STATION

Bengaluru: What looked like a routine Metro ride between Whitefield and Challaghatta turned out to be chaotic Sunday morning.

Around 11.40am, a Purple Line train carrying a full load of commuters came to a halt at Benniganahalli station near KR Pura. As soon as the train reached here, commuters were told to deboard and wait for the next train.

While BMRCL operates cut-short services during peak hours, that wasn't the case Sunday. Moments later, the empty train left the platform and another train full of passengers arrived. Commuters who thought of boarding the train were disappointed as the second train was emptied at the same platform.

By 11.50am, the platform towards Challaghatta was crowded with barely enough space to stand for commuters. "There was no proper communication as to what was happening there. Two trains full of passengers including those already waiting to board the train had cramped the platform with barely any space to stand. We went down to the concourse to enter but the staff was unaware of what was happening," Aswini TV, a commuter, said.

As the wait got longer, some had already exited the station, choosing to continue their journey by road. Deepak PN, who was travelling to Cubbon Park from Garudacharpalya, said: "We waited for around 25 minutes and there was no way we could continue our journey. Though we were allowed to board the third train that came, the rush was heavy".

Left with no other option and limited time, Deepak and his group of five friends had to take a cab to Cubbon Park. Meanwhile, commuters had also noticed two empty trains passing through the other platform towards Whitefield.

BMRCL said the stretch was experiencing a signalling failure, forcing the trains to come to a halt. "It was sorted out and not much of an inconvenience was caused to the public," an official said.

Water: Partial response to bandh in Chikkaballapur dist

A bandh called on Sunday demanding tertiary treatment of the HN Valley water received partial response across Chikkaballapur district.

Most business establishments remained shut, while KSRTC buses operated, though in fewer numbers. Autorickshaws and private buses stayed off the roads. The bandh was called by a joint action committee comprising several local organisations. Protesters took out a procession from Sidlagatta Circle to the municipal grounds, where a public meeting was held. TNN

Court upholds validity of Lokayukta inquiries, strikes down ruling on bias

TIMES NEWS NETWORK

The division bench said the single bench's view that Lokayukta and Upalokayukta should not play the dual role of prosecutor as well as inquirer is palpably incorrect

Bengaluru: A division bench of the high court has restored a legal provision that allows KPTCL (Karnataka Power Transmission Corporation Ltd) to entrust its disciplinary inquiries to Lokayukta.

KPTCL CASE

In the judgment delivered recently, it reversed a single-bench decision that struck down regulation 14(A) of the Karnataka Electricity Board (KEB) Regulations on grounds of real likelihood of bias. The regulation in question enables KPTCL to entrust disciplinary inquiries against its employees to Lokayukta.

Allowing a writ appeal filed by Lokayukta, the division bench comprising Justices DK Singh and S Rachaiah held that there was no statutory bar preventing the investigation and subsequent inquiry by the same institution, especially when there were different wings involved. It said the presumption drawn by the single bench was palpably incorrect. It said the institution of Lokayukta acted as an independent institution against corruption, and strengthening the institution of Lokayukta was the need of the hour.

It observed that the single judge's view that acquittal in a criminal case would lead to vengeful departmental action was completely unfounded, and that the recommendation of punishment did not establish bias.

The division bench also observed that the single bench view that the Lokayukta and Upalokayukta should not play the dual role of prosecutor as well as inquirer resulted from an incorrect reading of the provisions of the Lokayukta Act.

The case arose from disciplinary proceedings against V Ravindra Reddy, who worked as a mechanic Grade-II in Bescom, Chikkaballapura Urban division, and was booked in a bribery case in 2015. Lokayukta police filed a chargesheet in the criminal case, and the Upa Lokayukta submitted an inquiry report recommending disciplinary action against him.

Based on the report, the disciplinary inquiry was entrusted to Lokayukta, and the additional registrar (enquiries), Lokayukta, was appointed as the inquiry officer. Reddy then moved the high court challenging the constitutional validity of Regulation 14(A) of the KEB Regulations.

On Oct 16, 2024, the single bench declared Regulation 14(A) of the KEB Regulations unconstitutional and quashed the Lokayukta recommendations to impose compulsory retirement on Reddy, citing a real likelihood of bias. It stated that once Lokayukta formed an opinion recommending disciplinary action, it could not thereafter function as an impartial enquiry authority, creating a structural defect in holding the inquiry in violation of Article 14 of the Constitution of India. The single bench also held that Lokayukta could not don both the roles of prosecutor in a criminal case and an inquiry officer in disciplinary proceedings.

After perusing the provisions of the Lokayukta Act, the division bench noted that the inquiry officers in the institution of Lokayukta were all judicial officers deputed under the Karnataka Lokayukta (Cadre and Recruitment and Conditions of Service of the Officers and Employees) Rules, 1988.

It said that suggestions by the single bench that the inquiry officers would be biased and would not act independently, unfairly cast doubt on their integrity and functional ability to inquire into the allegations in the domestic inquiry against a delinquent public servant.

The division bench held, "There is no empirical basis to come to the conclusion that there is a 'manifest arbitrariness' in conducting the domestic inquiry... The finding of manifest arbitrariness is based on hypothetical assumptions rather than evidence."

The institutional functioning over four decades of Lokayukta was disrupted by the impugned judgement without any such material or empirical data, it observed.

April 9 bypolls to 2 assembly seats; Cong, BJP finetune battle strategy

TIMES NEWS NETWORK

Bengaluru: Two seats, one inconsequential battle, but plenty of bragging points at stake. Bypolls to Davanagere South and Bagalkot assembly constituencies will be held on April 9, with counting scheduled for May 4 alongside polls in four states and one Union territory.

Bypolls have been necessitated following the demise of two incumbent Congress MLAs and former ministers — Shamanur Shivashankarappa and HY Meti. Both constituencies are considered Lingayat strongholds but have historically favoured Congress largely due to the personal influence wielded by the two veterans.

Yet, the polls may be closely contested since internal bickering in Congress and the absence of strong candidates have turned the contests into an open race.

TOI

> Congress party is ready for these elections. There is no confusion on candidates and we will announce names soon
> **DK Shivakumar** | DEPUTY CM AND STATE CONGRESS PRESIDENT

In Davanagere South, questions have emerged within the Shivashankarappa family over the possible candidature of his grandson, Samarth. He's the son of horticulture minister SS Mallikarjun and Davanagere MP, Prabha Mallikarjun. There are demands over accommodating extended family. The party is also facing pressure from a section of the Muslim community to nominate MLC Abdul Jabbar.

"Congress has a sizeable Ahinda vote bank in the segment," said a party member, noting that nearly 30% of the electorate is Muslim.

In Bagalkot, Congress is expected to field one of Meti's three sons but sources say none of them possess the political foothold or public appeal that their father enjoyed.

BJP too facing headwinds

The only saving grace for Congress is that the opposition BJP-JD(S) alliance has troubles of their own. BJP is keen on retaining its Lingayat support ahead of zilla and taluk panchayat elections and is closely watching Congress' choice of candidate in Davanagere South.

BJP believes that if Congress fields a minority candidate, it could help BJP consolidate its core vote bank. Alternatively, BJP may consider fielding an OBC if Congress nominates a Lingayat aspirant.

Amid these developments, ex-MP GM Siddeshwar's wife Gayathri Siddeshwar is likely to enter the fray. She had earlier contested and lost the 2024 parliamentary elections.

In Bagalkot, BJP faces a debate over whether to continue with senior Lingayat leader Veeranna Charantimath or field a younger candidate more aligned with the party's long-term plans.

"While the Congress may have serious issues, BJP faces a dilemma on accommodating candidates who may fare better in the future as opposed to those who have already had multiple opportunities," said a BJP member. There is also the possibility of its alliance partner JD(S) seeking to flex its muscle in Bagalkot.

Saleem Ahmed, Congress MLC, said: "There is a meeting scheduled on March 24 to finalise the candidate for Davanagere South. For Bagalkot, the party will discuss candidates with the rank and file soon," he said.

CM's dinner meetings spark anticipation of cabinet rejig

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Bengaluru: Chief minister Siddaramaiah's decision to host a series of dinner meetings with his cabinet colleagues has triggered fresh political speculation amid the ongoing factional tension within governing Congress in Karnataka.

Siddaramaiah is scheduled to host a batch of 16 ministers for dinner Monday, with more meetings expected later in the week. The move comes close on the heels of deputy CM DK Shivakumar hosting a dinner for all Congress MLAs last week, to mark his completion of six years as state Congress president.

The past few weeks have also seen a series of informal dinner meetings among groups of ministers, including Lingayats led by MB Patil and Dalits led by G Parameshwara and Satish Jarkiholi. These meetings have drawn attention against the backdrop of a continuing tussle between camps led by Siddaramaiah and Shivakumar over the CM post, as well as growing demands from

TOI

PLOT THICKENS: CM Siddaramaiah and Mallikarjun Kharge

MLAs for a cabinet reshuffle.

At Monday's dinner, sources say Siddaramaiah is expected to urge those who have served more than two terms to make way for younger MLAs who are yet to get opportunities. A cabinet reshuffle was initially expected in Nov last year but was reportedly delayed due to heightened friction over the CM post.

Several ministerial aspirants are pressing for a cabinet reshuffle immediately after bypolls to Davanagere South and Bagalkot. "Besides providing new faces with an opportunity, a reshuffle adds freshness to govt administration and will help neutralise anti-incumbency," said Rizwan Arshad, MLA from Shivajinagar.

Recently, 37 first-time MLAs reportedly signed a letter to the party high command seeking a cabinet rejig. Also, 35 MLAs who were elected three times or more had planned to visit Delhi on March 26 to meet party brass, but that trip has now been postponed due to the bypolls.

"A cabinet reshuffle is in the interest of the party. It is only a matter of time before the high command takes a call," said Saleem Ahmed, Congress chief whip in legislative council.

The dinner meetings are also seen as efforts to prepare the party for the bypolls and polls to zilla and taluk panchayats. Party brass has already formed teams to oversee campaign activities for the bypolls.

"We have not been told about the agenda for the dinner meeting. We will abide by whatever the party decides and are ready to shoulder any new responsibilities," said transport minister Ramalinga Reddy.

After tariff shock, Escoms offer instalment balm

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Bengaluru: Days after raising tariffs on commercial and industrial consumers to offset revenue losses from increased power subsidies to farmers, electricity supply companies (Escoms) have decided to extend partial relief to impacted consumers. Instead of recovering the entire differential amount upfront, Escoms will collect it in instalments over six months.

After the revised Karnataka Electricity Regulatory Commission order triggered confusion, energy department officials clarified that the additional retrospective amount will not be collected in one go. Instead, recovery mechanisms and timelines have been structured to ease the blow.

"Revised tariff will be calculated against actual consumption, and the differential amount — which may range from a few thousand to several lakh rupees — will be recovered in six equal instalments along with monthly power bills," a senior official said. He said no interest will be levied on the differential amount.

Officials say stretching the recovery period beyond six months is unviable. "The longer the recovery period, the greater the loss to utilities. However, the govt will decide on the number of months," the official said.

Meanwhile, industry and trade bodies have challenged KERC's order in court, arguing that the hike would adversely affect industrial operations. Anticipating legal proceedings, Escoms filed caveats to ensure their submissions are heard before an interim order is passed.

AFP

NK to suffer most

An analysis shows industries and commercial establishments in North Karnataka — especially backward districts of Kalyan Karnataka — will face the steepest impact. Gulbarga Electricity Supply Company consumers will pay Rs 3.29 per unit, the highest. Those under the Hubballi Electricity Supply Company in Kittur Karnataka will pay Rs 3.23 per unit, while consumers in Chamundeshwari Electricity Supply Corporation limits around Mysuru will pay Rs 3.2 per unit. In contrast, Bangalore Electricity Supply Company consumers face a comparatively lower hike of Rs 2.07 per unit.

Industry leaders flayed the govt for burdening tier-2 and tier-3 cities with higher tariffs. "On one hand, the govt invites industries to invest in North Karnataka, while on the other, it imposes higher power tariffs that make operations unviable. Unless the govt intervenes, investments and commercial activity in the region will suffer," said an industrialist from Kalaburagi.

MLA APOLOGISES FOR REMARKS AGAINST SEER

Srirangapatna MLA AB Ramesh Bandisiddegowda apologised for controversial remarks about Nirmalanandanatha Swami, head of Adichunchanagiri Mutt. At an event, the MLA appeared to criticise the seer, saying he should follow the legacy of the late seer Balagangadharanatha Swami by taking everyone into confidence, maintaining emotional unity, and not discriminating between rich and poor. On Sunday, the MLA said he did not mean to suggest the mutt was functioning poorly. He said his remarks were a request to continue the inclusive legacy of the previous seer.

Jobs portal does not require ₹5cr, says KDA

Bengaluru: Ten days after Siddaramaiah announced a new online employment exchange in the 2026-27 state budget, Kannada Development Authority (KDA) chairman Purushottama Bilimale and Kannada actor **Pooja Gandhi** have claimed that they originally proposed the initiative.

The two also said the portal would not require the Rs 5 crore allocation mentioned in the budget, arguing that it could be developed using existing digital infrastructure.

Gandhi welcomed the govt's move but insisted the idea was discussed earlier with authorities. "Karnataka already has infrastructure like the skill connect portal, which has significant potential to be expanded," Gandhi said. "For the past two years, I have been continuously engaging with the govt through the KDA, suggesting that it can be enhanced to make it more effective and accessible for unemployed Kannadigas."

Supporting her claim, Bilimale said Gandhi's proposal was discussed with Shivaraj Tangadagi, Kannada and culture minister, after which directions were issued to the skill development department to create such an employment exchange. "The proposal was sent to the govt but no response was received," said Bilimale. "We expected a response as an online jobs portal is mandated in our comprehensive Kannada Implementation Act, 2022. But before this could happen, the budget announcement was made."

Gandhi says she had approached KDA three months ago and submitted a detailed proposal that was intended to be forwarded to the CM during preparation for the budget.

However, officials say the proposal within the administration is being driven by chief secretary Shalini Rajneesh and labour secretary Salma Fahim. TNN

15L excess issued, 7.8L flagged as suspicious

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Bengaluru: Karnataka's public distribution system is in the spotlight after the state govt admitted it issued about 15 lakh more below poverty line (BPL) ration cards than the number of eligible families identified by the Centre.

Data tabled in the assembly by food and civil supplies minister KH Muniyappa last week shows that while the Centre has identified almost 1.1 crore eligible families, the state has issued 1.24 crore BPL cards. Also, nearly 7.8 lakh beneficiaries have been flagged as suspicious.

BPL RATION CARDS

Replying on behalf of Muniyappa in the assembly, health minister Dinesh Gundu Rao said coverage is extensive, especially in rural areas where it is about 95% of households.

"In many areas, ineligible people apply for ration cards for other purposes — hospitalisation for instance," Rao said. "If the Centre does not fund the excess, the state will have to step in."

Failing eligibility norms

Meanwhile, the department has identified over seven lakh suspicious beneficiaries based on eligibility norms set by both Centre and the state. Central criteria consider beneficiaries ineligible if their group annual income exceeds Rs 1.2 lakh, GST turnover crosses Rs 25 lakh, or if UIDAI records mark the person as deceased. Beneficiaries with more than 7.5 acres of land under the PM-Kisan database or those owning vehicles above a specified value are also flagged.

TOI

INCOME CEILING MAY BE INCREASED TO ₹3 LAKH

The state govt plans to revise the Rs 1.2 lakh annual income ceiling for ration card eligibility, acknowledging that the limit fixed in 2017 is outdated. "Administrative reforms commission headed by RV Deshpande has recommended increasing it to Rs 3 lakh. The food department will evaluate the appropriate revision," health and family welfare minister Dinesh Gundu Rao told the House.

The exclusion rule applies to govt employees and staff of govt-run corporations who pay taxes, households owning more than three acres of land, urban houses exceeding 1,000sqft, families owning four-wheelers for non-commercial use, or those with annual incomes above Rs 1.2 lakh.

Meanwhile, thousands of applications remain pending. As of Feb 22, nearly 1.8 lakh priority household (PHH) applications were awaiting disposal, with the highest numbers in Kalaburagi (26,941), Belagavi (16,712), and Bengaluru (16,475). Another 1.3 non-priority household (NPHH) cards are pending clearance, including 11,267 in Belagavi, 10,147 in Bengaluru South and 10,035 in Bengaluru West.

In Sept 2023, the state suspended approval of new NPHH cards. Legislators were told that ineligible PHH cards were being converted into NPHH cards, and in Oct 2025 the govt directed officials to convert such cards while issuing an equal number of new priority cards to eligible applicants.

Meanwhile, the food and civil supplies department stopped the open market sale scheme (domestic) of the Food Corporation of India in July 2023, which earlier supplied subsidised rice and wheat to NPHH beneficiaries.

"Grains were distributed until Feb 2024, and rice distribution for NPHH ration cards was temporarily suspended," Muniyappa said in a written reply to Vedavyasa Kamath (Mangaluru South).

Summer heat grips Mysuru, Kodagu districts

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Mysuru: With maximum temperatures crossing 35°C for the past two days, Mysuru is witnessing an unofficial curfew-like situation between noon and 4pm, as residents avoid stepping out in the scorching heat.

Kodagu, usually known for its pleasant climate and as a popular holiday destination, is also experiencing unusually high temperatures. According to data from the Karnataka State Natural Disaster Monitoring Centre (KSNDMC), the district recorded a maximum temperature of 35.6°C on Saturday and 35.4°C on Friday. Earlier this week, temperatures hovered between 33°C and 34°C. Residents say peak summer conditions are being felt much earlier than usual. During afternoon hours, Mysuru wears a deserted look, with many people preferring to stay indoors. "We are waiting for a couple of good rains," said H Venkatesh, a resident of Bogadi.

The neighbouring Kodagu, too, is recording higher-than-normal temperatures. The district registered a maximum temperature of 33.7°C on both Friday and Saturday, as per KSNDMC data.

Meanwhile, inflows into major reservoirs remain low. As of Sunday, the Krishnaraja Sagar (KRS) recorded an inflow of 212 cusecs, while Kabini dam in HD Kote taluk of Mysuru district received 76 cusecs. Hemavathi dam in Hassan district recorded an inflow of 52 cusecs.

G Srinivasa Reddy, former director of KSNDMC, said the impact of global warming is being increasingly felt. "Since Feb, several parts of the state, especially coastal areas, have witnessed above-normal temperatures."

Odisha to B'luru: Bribe offer, threats at resort trigger political storm

▶ Continued from page 1

Das told police that ahead of the March 16 Rajya Sabha elections, Congress shifted eight MLAs from Odisha to a resort near Bengaluru on March 12, amid fears of cross-voting and poaching. He alleged plans of kidnapping the legislators.

The legislators were housed at Wonderla Bengaluru, near Bidadi, and were scheduled to return to Odisha shortly before voting. As per the complaint: "On Sunday, four persons allegedly met a few of the MLAs and tried to bribe them Rs 5 crore each for cross-voting in favour of BJP. When the MLAs rejected the offer, the four persons allegedly threatened to kill them if they returned to Odisha and also abused them."

The four persons have been identified as Birendra Prasad, Suresh, Ajith Kumar Sahu, and Simanchal Mahakud. A senior officer said Suresh and Birendra were caught at the resort, while the others managed to escape. The rooms at the Wonderla resort were booked in the name of Suresh.

Earlier in the day, Shivakumar said the legislators refused the offer and immediately informed the party leadership. He said the four visitors, also believed to be from Odisha, had booked rooms with the help of a local resident and attempted to contact the MLAs at a resort near Bidadi.

AI

DKS on legal action

Shivakumar accused BJP of facilitating the alleged approach to the MLAs — a charge the party has previously denied in similar cases. Asked whether the Congress would lodge a formal complaint, Shivakumar said the matter would be pursued legally. "The law will take care of the rest," he said.

"The two men detained by police have admitted to arriving for this purpose and were carrying blank cheques. This is how Operation Lotus is being executed," Shivakumar alleged. During a meeting with aspirants to Bengaluru civic polls, he recalled raids on his residence followed by his arrest in 2017, when he was hosting MLAs ahead of a previous Rajya Sabha election.

The move to shift the Odisha MLAs to Bengaluru came as five candidates are contesting from four seats in Odisha, with the fourth seat turning competitive after BJP backed Independent candidate Dilip Ray, while the BJD and Congress jointly fielded Datteshwar Hota. The relocation was aimed at preventing defections and securing the coalition's numbers during the vote.

In the Odisha assembly, BJP has 79 MLAs, BJD 48, and Congress 14. For the RS polls, a candidate needs at least 30 first-preference votes to win a seat. On current numbers, two BJP candidates and one BJD nominee are expected to win comfortably. Aside from the eight MLAs, those staying in Karnataka as part of the Congress strategy included an MP and two AICC secretaries, all housed at the same resort.

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Deeply missed by family and friends
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TIMES NATION

THE TIMES OF INDIA, BENGALURU | MONDAY, MARCH 16, 2026

TVK CHIEF VIJAY APPEARS BEFORE CBI IN DELHI FOR 3RD ROUND OF QUESTIONING IN KARUR STAMPEDE PROBE

MIN GADKARI SAYS CLOSE FRIEND'S DEATH IN ACCIDENT WAS TURNING POINT BEHIND HIS PUSH FOR ROAD SAFETY

HACK OF THE DAY TURN YOUR PHONE INTO A REMOTE FOR YOUR SMART TV

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Tip from **heena.gupta**@timesinternet

Scan for more hacks

Govt may relook at bilaterals as int'l airfares defy gravity

Sharp Spike In ATF, Crashing Rupee Leading To Higher Op Costs

Saurabh.Sinha
@timesofindia.com

Since 2014, the Modi govt has focused on strengthening the Indian carriers through a virtual freeze on bilaterals and that has bore fruit in terms of IndiGo becoming a giant in its right

New Delhi: Skyrocketing international airfares may lead govt to review its unstated policy of not enhancing flying rights of foreign airlines, in a bid to come to the rescue of the travelling public. Indian carriers' operating costs going through the roof due to the sharp spike in aviation turbine fuel (ATF) prices and the rupee crashing to new lifelows on a daily basis — along with a drop in supply of the seats offered by Gulf carriers — means international airfares are likely to remain elevated in the foreseeable future. In this backdrop, industry sources say there may be a revision in bilaterals of some countries that have remained largely frozen for early a decade to increase supply to and from India and help douse the fares on fire.

Among the places that have long been seeking an upward revision are almost all in the Gulf including Dubai, Qatar and Abu Dhabi. There are others too like Singapore.

Since 2014, the Modi govt has focussed on strengthening Indian carriers through a virtual freeze on bilaterals and that has bore fruit in terms of IndiGo becoming a giant in its right; Air India group's ghar waapsi to founder Tata Sons and now being flush with funds and fleet orders; and new carriers like Akasa, Star Air and Fly91 taking to the skies. Last year Indian carriers added 80 additional aircraft to their fleet and will induct a new plane almost every week between them.

"While we continue to bat for rationalising both the base pricing of ATF and the states (VAT) and central (excise) levies on it, there is a thinking now to consider reviewing bilaterals that haven't been revised for a long time now despite the increase in demand in travel. (Except ATF pricing) Indian carriers have got all support in the last one decade. Now the time may have come to help lower fares by considering the enhancement of foreign airlines' capacity and increasing supply," said an industry executive.

Also with India getting new airport like Navi Mumbai and the hugely-delayed Noida likely to open this summer, some airport operators including Adani Group have been seeking a revision in bilaterals. The freeze in bilaterals means that new capacity can't be added to places like Dubai, which before the Israel-Iran war was the biggest international destination for Indian globetrotters. Akasa, for instance, hasn't been able to fly there as the bilaterals are fully utilised by airlines of both sides.

UAE port attacked but Indian tanker sails off safely

Times News Network

A Liberian-flagged tanker, MT Smyrni, carrying about 1.4 lakh tonnes of crude reached Mumbai port on Saturday night. This is the third tanker to reach an Indian port after crossing Strait of Hormuz amid West Asian conflict

New Delhi: India-flagged oil tanker 'Jag Laadki', which was loading crude at UAE's Fujairah port on Saturday when the oil terminal was attacked, sailed safely for India from the port on Sunday morning, the shipping ministry said. The ship is carrying around 80,800 tonnes of Murban crude, an oil grade produced by the UAE, it added.

The ministry also said all Indian seafarers on board the vessel were safe. The ship is owned and operated by the Mumbai-based Great Eastern Shipping Company.

A Liberian-flagged tanker, MT Smyrni, carrying about 1.4 lakh tonnes of crude reached the Mumbai port on Saturday night. This is the third tanker to reach an Indian port after crossing Strait of Hormuz amid the West Asian conflict.

In a statement, govt said, "Two Indian-flag LPG carriers, Shivalik and Nanda Devi, carrying about 92,712 tonnes of LPG, which crossed the Strait of Hormuz on March 14, are currently on passage to India and are scheduled to reach Mundra Port on March 16 and Kandla Port on March 17, respectively."

At present, 22 Indian-flagged vessels with 611 seafarers remain west of the Persian Gulf region. India has been in discussions with Iran for safe passage of India-flagged ships in the conflict-hit region.

Leopard kills 10-yr-old girl in Bjinor

A 10-year-old girl was killed by a leopard in Mukarrampur village of Bijnor's Nahtaur area on Sunday, reports **Harveer Dabas.** The animal pounced on Aditi, grabbed her by the neck and dragged her towards the forest as she was on her way home from the fields with her mother and brother around 10am. Hearing her mother's screams, villagers rushed to the spot with sticks and rods, forcing the leopard to abandon the child about 200m away and flee into nearby sugarcane fields. Aditi was taken to a hospital, where doctors declared her dead.

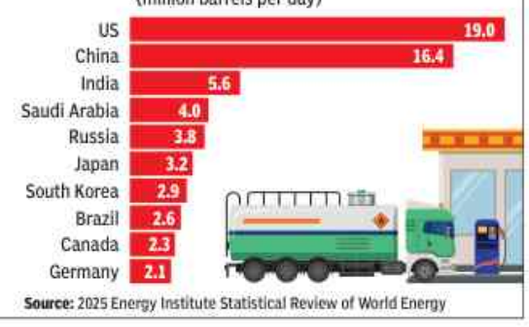
Tehsildar Dhanraj Kumar, circle officer Abhay Kumar Pandey and deputy ranger Hardev Singh reached the spot to assess the situation as villagers demanded that the animal be captured.

STATISTICS A slice of life in numbers

Who are the world's biggest oil guzzlers?

In 2024, the US and China dominated global oil consumption at 19 and 16 million barrels per day, respectively, far ahead of India's 5.6 million barrels per day

Countries with highest oil consumption, 2024
(million barrels per day)



Source: 2025 Energy Institute Statistical Review of World Energy

DGCA allows Air India pilots to fly more as alternate routes to west make flights longer

Saurabh.Sinha
@timesofindia.com

While upset at serious fatigue-inducing extra flying being required of them, AI pilots say they are doing so due to special requirements amid the war

New Delhi: The Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) has allowed Air India wide body pilots to fly for longer hours through a temporary flight duty time limitation (FDTL) relaxation due to the much longer routes the airline is forced to take on its flights between India and Europe, UK and North America amid the Iran war. Under the 1.5 hours' extended flying time, pilots can now fly for upto 11.5 hours.

Pilots allege on some quick return flights to the Gulf (which all flights are these days), the flying time goes beyond 11.5 hours like the flights going to and returning from Jeddah has exceeded this at least once. While upset at the serious fatigue-inducing extra flying being required of them, AI pilots say they are doing so due to the special requirements amid the war.

This is back-breaking flying time, specially on the Boeing 787 Dreamliner where the flight deck seats recline less due to technical reasons.

Understanding pilots' anxiety and thanking them for their "professionalism", AI senior VP (flight operations) Captain Manish Uppal wrote to pilots late last week: "…the evolving security situation across parts of the Middle East has resulted in temporary airspace closures and routing restrictions, which continue to impact several of our short haul, long-haul and ultra-long-haul operations.... Based on continuous risk assessments, regulatory advisories, and NOTAM activity, certain (airspaces) in the Middle East region remain unavailable or restricted. To ensure safety remains paramount, our scheduled and additional recovery flights are being rerouted via safe alternate corridors. Our ultra-long-haul routes are being routed through technical stops (for fuel and crew rest) at Rome on select sectors."

2 kids killed & 7 injured in Chennai LPG blast

Chennai: Two children died and seven people were injured in an LPG blast inside a house in Chennai's Navalur on Sunday morning.

Police suspect that domestic LPG cylinders bought on black market were used for commercial cooking without proper permission or safety safeguards. A fire official told **TOI** that commercial cylinder regulators, tubes and a stove appeared to have been used with domestic cylinders.

Krishika (4) and one-and-a-half-year-old Dheeran, children of Sudha, who had come to visit a relative residing in a portion of the house, died on the spot. Sudha escaped unhurt.

Six of Sudha's relatives sustained burn injuries.

Residents of the normally calm neighbourhood said an explosion ripped through the street, sending flames and debris into the air and leaving people running out of their homes in panic. Sudha's relative Vairamuthu, along with his wife Selvi and their son Pradeep, had rented a portion of the house. Vairamuthu works in a fast-food shop and had also been preparing food at home and supplying it to canteens, eateries and private customers for the past three months, police said. TNN

Scuffles, panic and hoarding keep LPG crisis simmering

Times News Network

Scuffles, protests, panic bookings, black marketing and raids combined with shrinking menus and hotel losses as the LPG crisis caused by the Iran conflict simmered on Sunday, albeit with a silver lining in some areas where limited commercial gas supplies resumed for restaurants.

In Ranchi, a scuffle broke out among consumers queued outside an LPG dealer's outlet. "Around 150 consumers had gathered. Many were promised cylinders on Sunday. While they were there, more consumers came and demanded cylinders. That led to chaos. A police team brought the situation under control," said Daily Market police station incharge Ravi Kumar Sinha.

Tension ran high across the Jharkhand capital with similar queues in many areas. Ranchi DM Manjunath Bhajantri ordered strict LPG monitoring to prevent black-marketing. In Steel City Jamshedpur, many industrial canteens have sliced menus. A gas dealer and its officials in Lucknow had an FIR lodged against them for allegedly storing cylinders illegally and attempting to black market them. A raid revealed the cylinders were stored at a resort without papers, officials said. In Karnataka, authorities launched a crackdown on illegal refilling with LPG raids in Bengaluru and Kolar.

Hyderabad battled fear. The LPG shortage triggered a 300% surge in bookings. While the city usually records around 70,000 bookings per day, the number has surged to 2.5 lakh to 3 lakh. D Ashok Kumar, president of Greater Hyderabad Gas Dealers Association, spoke of servers slowing and crashing. "In the last few days, we delivered nearly five lakh cylinders, 120% of the usual volumes. There is no domestic LPG shortage," Kumar said. Kolkata had reason for hope, but only just. With domestic LPG supply easing, oil marketing companies (OMCs) began releasing 25% of commercial LPG cylinders from Sunday, offering partial relief to restaurants. "The food industry holds a huge employment base. We sent feelers to the petroleum ministry through OMCs," said Bijon Bihari Biswas, a spokesperson for LPG dealers. Many still struggled. "Customers don't understand any shortage. If we stop preparing some dishes, they just go somewhere else," said Zubair, a vendor of snacks near Kolkata's New Market, fretting about reduced earnings.

Petroleum ministry gets two special officers

New Delhi: Amid the concerns over gas supply, govt has appointed two officers on special duty (OSDs) in the petroleum ministry. While their role is not fully clear, 2006-batch IFS officer A Amarnath's appointment comes at a time when govt is closely working with countries in the Gulf region for safe passage of vessels carrying crude, LPG and LNG. He was earlier deputy chief of mission at the Indian embassy in UAE.

Alok Tripathi, a 1999-batch Indian Railway Traffic Service (IRTS) officer, who has also been appointed as OSD, is expected to help chalk out the logistics strategy to ensure that no part of the country is deprived of energy supply. TNN

6 India-flagged ships on standby at Hormuz

▶ Continued from page 1

India imports nearly 60% of its LPG requirement and about 90% of it comes through the Strait of Hormuz, which has effectively been closed since the military conflict broke out in West Asia. While two ships carrying 97,200 metric tonnes of LPG are scheduled to reach Mumbai in the next couple of days, officials said six more carrying the fuel were among 22 Indian-flagged vessels currently on standby on the western side of Hormuz. While govt has maintained that there is no shortage of domestic LPG, panic-stricken consumers trying to procure refills have led to a surge in bookings. It also said there were adequate crude oil and petroleum inventories.

Officials from the ministry, the Petroleum and Natural Gas Regulatory Board and city gas distribution companies met on Friday to review the status of consumers willing to activate their PNG connections or convert from LPG to piped gas. Govt is also encouraging commercial LPG consumers in major cities to opt for PNG connections.

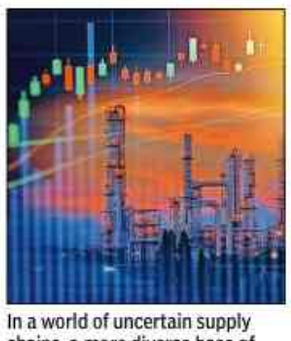
India in stronger position to handle crisis

Times News Network

New Delhi: India today is in a far stronger position to handle disruptions in global energy markets than it was a decade ago, officials said on Sunday. While Strait of Hormuz remains an important chokepoint, India can reroute vessels and shift strategy to other energy-exporting countries.

In a world of increasingly uncertain supply chains, a wider and more diverse base of energy sources and partnerships has become an important safeguard for the country's energy security.

India used to import 55% of its crude from non-Hormuz routes before the military conflict began in West Asia a fortnight ago. Officials said the share has now increased to 70%. India has also tapped additional countries to source natural gas and liquefied petroleum gas, and cargoes through non-Hormuz routes have also started arriving. India imports nearly half of its natural gas requirement and about 60% of LPG.



In a world of uncertain supply chains, a more diverse base of energy sources has become an important safeguard

"By expanding domestic production, managing the transition to new energy sources and diversifying supply sources, the Modi govt has reduced the country's vulnerability to external shocks to its energy needs," said an official.

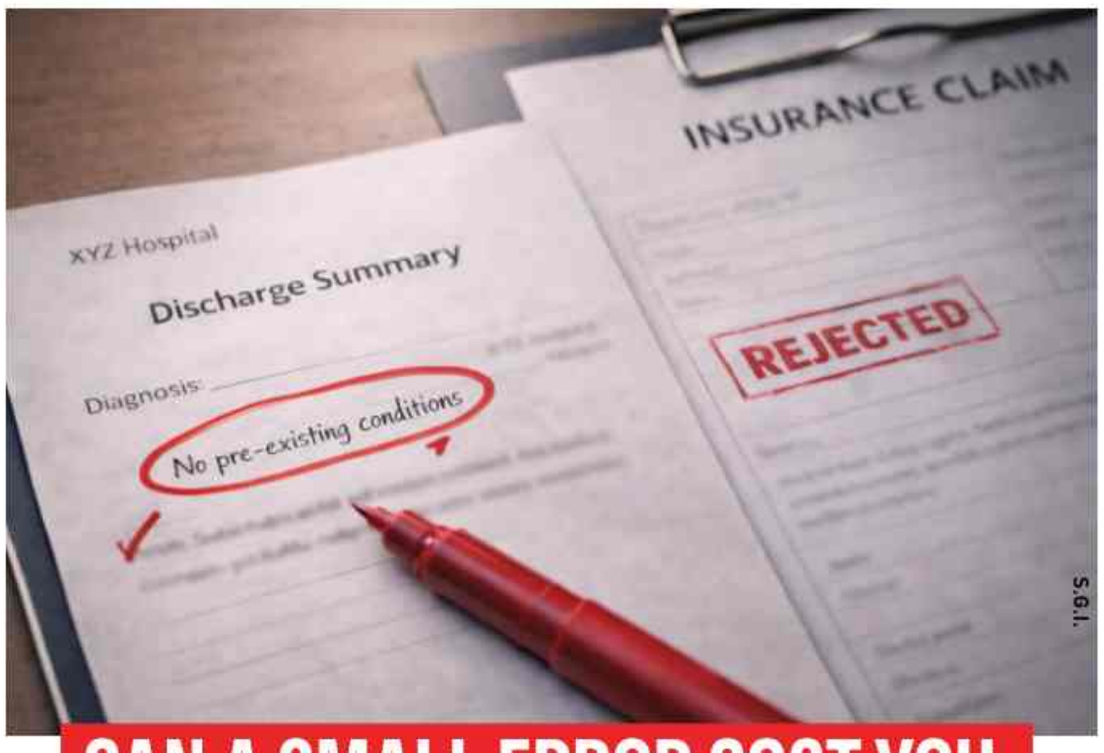
Officials noted the Narendra Modi govt pursued a policy of multi-alignment, enabling India to cultivate deeper relationships with multiple states to advance its interests. This diplomatic outreach has expanded India's crude sourcing base from 27 countries a decade ago to more than 40 today.

Another major factor reducing India's vulnerability to energy imports is the 20% ethanol blending programme, which displaces roughly 44 million barrels of crude oil annually.

The govt also backed the development of the country's electric vehicle (EV) industry. About 2.8 lakh EVs were added in the first phase of Faster Adoption and Manufacturing of (Hybrid &) Electric Vehicles in India (FAME I), launched in 2015, resulting in fuel savings of about 59 million litres.

In the second phase of FAME, launched in 2019, incentives and concessions to consumers for hybrid and EV purchases supported the sale of 16 lakh EVs and the expansion of charging infrastructure, saving about 42.9 million litres of fuel.

EV registrations in India in 2023-24 increased nearly tenfold compared with 2019-20. In 2025-26, EV sales reached 2.3 million units, accounting for about 8% of total vehicle registrations.



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CHANGE Begins Here.

Beacon on Mum mayor's car removed

Mumbai: BMC has removed red-and-blue beacons from the official vehicles of Mumbai mayor Ritu Tawde, deputy mayor Sanjay Ghadi and leader of the House in BMC Ganesh Khankar of BJP following a controversy over their use. While CM Fadnavis asserted that the mayor is not to be blamed, she called it a lapse by the civic administration, saying she had no interest in using a beacon. To end VIP culture, the Centre had in 2017 banned beacons on all vehicles, barring those used for emergency, law and order, and disaster management. TNN

Doctors opt for relieving symptoms, not prolonging life

▶ Continued from page 1

The process generally involves withholding or withdrawing life-sustaining treatment of patients with irreversible medical conditions while ensuring adequate pain relief and supportive care.

When contacted, Dr Seema Mishra, professor and head of the department of onco-anaesthesia and palliative medicine, declined to comment. Sources said there are strict instructions to doctors not to speak to the media.

Sources said when recovery is no longer possible, treatment shifts to palliative care, which focuses on relieving symptoms and keeping the patient comfortable rather than prolonging life artificially. Care plans are tailored for each patient, addressing physical, psychological and social needs, with doctors regularly assessing their condition and adjusting treatment. Decisions are made in consultation with the family, and the duration of this phase can vary from days to weeks depending on the patient's condition.

Dr Sushma Bhatnagar, former AIIMS chief and professor of onco-anaesthesia and palliative medicine, said once doctors determine that the condition is irreversible and recovery is not possible, the focus shifts to comfort care.

"In such situations, life-support measures such as oxygen, artificial nutrition or other medical support may be gradually withdrawn. The process is carried out slowly and carefully so that the patient does not experience distress or discomfort. The aim is not to prolong suffering but to ensure that the patient remains comfortable. However, the exact time it takes varies widely and cannot be predicted without assessing the patient's condition and other medical parameters," she said.

Most Goa beaches polluted, unfit for bathing, water sports

Faecal Content Over Limit Near Opa Drinking Water Project

Gauree.Malkarnekar @timesofindia.com

Panaji: For a state like Goa which is dependant on fishing for its diet and tourism for its economy, it should come as bad news that coastal waters in and around all its major beaches have been found polluted. They have not met Central Pollution Control Board's (CPCB) criteria for SW-II categorisation, which means the water is unfit for bathing, contact water sports and commercial fishing.

The water consistently tested high for faecal content, beyond the limits prescribed by the CPCB, as per the reply tabled in the ongoing assembly session. This was also true at three of the four notified olive ridley turtle nesting sites in Goa at Morjim, Galgibaga and Agonda. Most of Goa's rivers too had high faecal coliform content, up to 300% higher during some months than the prescribed norm. In Oct 2024, the limit even crossed in Khandepar at Opa, water from which tapped for treatment for drinking supply.

Water was found high in faecal content for most months of 2024-25 in the coastal waters of Tiracol, Miramar, Bambolim, Calangute, Baga, Morjim, Vagator, Arambol, Baina, Colva, Benaulim and Palolem, states the reply tabled in the assembly by chief minister Pramod Sawant, who also holds the environment portfolio.

Even a remote beach like Rajbhag in Canacona was found to be polluted by the tests carried out by the Goa State Pollution Control Board. The condition was equally bad when it comes to rivers, and it is not just the Mandovi and Sal which are polluted. Tests were also carried out in Tiracol at Keri-Pernem, Chapora near Siolim bridge, and Sinquerim on Candolim side and near Ganpati temple. All these samples were found high in faecal coliform.

This was also true for water of Zuari tested at Panchawadi, Cortalim, Madkai jetty and Borim bridge.

Faecal coliform content also exceeded prescribed limits in Valvanti in Sanquelim only during Sep 2024.

The permissible limit for faecal coliform is 100 or less MPN per 100ml. Faecal coliform MPN stands for most probable number. It is a statistical method used in water quality testing to estimate the concentration of viable microorganisms, such as E Coli, by observing fermentation in diluted samples, usually reported as MPN per 100ml.

Faecal content in July 2024 in Tiracol, for instance, was 3,300 MPN as against prescribed limit of 100MPD per 100ml. The CM stated the water resources department has been directed to plug sewage discharge into rivers to improve the water quality.

BLEAK TIMES

Consistently polluted (April 2024 to March 2025)
➤ Tiracol, Miramar, Bambolim, Calangute, Baga, Morjim, Vagator, Arambol, Baina, Colva, Benaulim, Palolem, Rajbhag

Coastal water polluted during some months
➤ Galigabaga, Agonda

Rivers with faecal coliform for most months
➤ Tiracol at Keri-Pernem; Chapora near Siolim bridge; Sinquerim on Candolim side and near Ganpati temple; Sal near Rumder-Nuvem, at Mobor, at Pazarconi-Cuncolim, Orlim bridge; Khandepar; Zuari at Panchawadi, Cortalim, Madkai jetty and Borim bridge

Rivers meeting CPCB quality of water norms (2024-25)
➤ Chapora near Alorna fort, Pernem Kalna at Chandel in Pernem; Mhadei at Dabose, Valpoi; Assonora at Assonora; Bicholim at Barazan nagar; Khushwati at Rivona, Sanguem; Talpona at Canacona

Directorate of Geology and Mining, Govt. of Uttarakhand,
Bhopalpani, Raipur-Thano Road, Dehradun

No.7399 /Mining/MDTSS-Minetag/2025-26, Dated 13 March, 2026

Tender Invitation Notice

The Director General/Director, Directorate of Geology and Mining, Govt. of Uttarakhand Bhopalpani, Raipur-Thano Road, Dehradun on behalf of the Governor of Uttarakhand invities responses ("Tenders") to this Request for proposal ("RFP") from eligible firms/companies etc. ("Bidders") for **Design, Supply & Distribution and PR Activities of RFID Based Mine Tag for Mineral Transporting Vehicles in Uttarakhand for lease/license holders as detailed out in the Scope of Work of the RFP.** This RFP document can be downloaded from www.uktenders.gov.in and www.dgm.uk.gov.in from 16.03.2026. Technical Bids are required to be submitted online only on /before 24.03.2026 to 06.04.2026 upto 17:00 hrs.

Sd/-
(Rajpal Legha)
Director
Department of Geology & Mining, Uttarakhand

25001/338/2526

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No. Tender Online - RWCCESNG - 40 of 2025-26, Letter No 1681 /Dtd. 12.03.2026

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2. Class of Contractor : As specified in the column-6 of the Annexure
3. Time of Completion : As specified in the column-5 of the Annexure
4. Detail Projects : As per Annexure attached
5. Estimated Cost : As specified in the column-4 of the Annexure
6. Other details:

Procurement Officer	Bid Identification No.	Availability of tender on-line for bidding		Last Date & Time for seeking Tender Clarification	Date & Time of opening of tender	
		From	To		Technical Bid	Financial Bid
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Chief Construction Engineer, Rural Works Circle, Sundargarh	RWCCESNG-40 of 2025-26	20.03.2026 11:00 AM	06.04.2026 5:00 PM	04.04.2026 5:00 PM	07.04.2026 11:00 AM	Will be intimated separately

Further details can be seen from the website www.tendersodisha.gov.in

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Rural Works Circle, Sundargarh
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OFFICE OF THE ENGINEER-IN-CHIEF (CIVIL), ODISHA
NIRMAN SOUDHA, UNIT-V, BHUBANESWAR
INVITATIONS FOR BIDS (IFB)

File No.B-IV-H-(ALMC)-05/2026 No. 8571 Dt.12th Mar., 2026

Invitation for Bids
Bid Identification No. CE-Bldg-I-55 / 2025-26

1.	The Chief Engineer, Buildings-I, Odisha, Bhubaneswar, on behalf of Works Deptt., Govt. of Odisha, invites percentage rate bids in double cover system in ONLINE MODE only.		
2.	Nature of work	:	Supply and Fixing of Portable Aerosol based Automatic Fire Detection and Suppression System in various HVAC system at different health buildings under GE Section-IV at SCBMCH, Cuttack.
3.	No. of work	:	01 No.
4.	Bid Cost.	:	Rs. 10,000/-
5.	Class of Contractor	:	Specialized agency MOU with electrical contractor having valid MV/HT or above license from ELBO.
6.	Availability of Bid Documents in the website	:	From dt.19.03.2026 to 17:00 hours of dt.02.04.2026.
7.	Date of Opening of Bid	:	Dt.04.04.2026 at 11:30 AM.
8.	The Bidders have to participate in ONLINE bidding only. Further details can be seen from the website: **https://tendersodisha.gov.in**. Any addendum / corrigendum / cancellation of tender can also be seen in the said website. The authority reserves the right to reject any or all bids without assigning any reason thereof.		

Sd/-
Chief Engineer, Buildings-I, Odisha, Bhubaneswar
OIPR-34001/34117/1/25-26/0038

BANGALORE WATER SUPPLY AND SEWERAGE BOARD

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BWSSB invite tenders in Two Stage Tender System from Eligible Contractors for the below mentioned works.

Office of The Chief Engineer (Central), 6th Floor, Cauvery Bhavan, KG Road, Bangalore-560009.

Sl. No.	Name of Work	Amount Put to Tender EMD
No: BWSSB/CE(Central)/DCE(WWM-E&W)/TA-1/262/2025-26		Date: 12.03.2026
1	Providing and laying 1100mm dia DI rising main inside storm water drain opposite from Royal Orchid Hotel to KGA Road, Domluru.(Additional Length)	Rs. 358.09 Lakhs / Rs. 5.37 Lakhs
No: BWSSB/CE(Central)/DCE(WWM-E&W)/TA-1/260/2025-26		Date: 12.03.2026
2	Providing and laying 1100mm dia DI rising main from ISPS Domluru flyover towards Diamond District Apartment, Old Airport Road, Domluru.(Additional Length)	Rs. 358.30 Lakhs / Rs. 5.37 Lakhs

For the above work Last date and time for Receipt of tenders will be on **15.04.2026 upto 16.00 hrs**. The technical bids will be opened on: **16.04.2026 at 17.00 hrs**.

Sd/- Chief Engineer (Central)

The detail regarding the tender & participation in the e-procurement portal process can be obtained by logging on to **https://kppp.karnataka.gov.in.** For further details contact the below signed office during working hours.

DIPR/CP/6252/Zen/2025-26

Aligarh BJP MP opposes namaz on public ground

Mohammad.Dilshad@timesofindia.com

Agra: Aligarh's BJP MP Satish Gautam triggered a controversy after opposing AIMIM's demand for permission to offer Eid namaz at Aligarh Exhibition Ground, also known as Numaish Ground, and saying he did not know "what Ramzan or Eid is".

He said there was no need to allot the ground for prayers as the community already had an Eidgah and added that even the morning loudspeaker announcements from there should be stopped. His remarks quickly triggered a political row in the city, where the issue had already drawn attention after AIMIM approached the district administration for permission to use the venue for Eid-ul-Fitr prayers on March 20 or 21.

Gautam said, "Govt is giving them houses, ration and other facilities. They are taking advantage of all govt schemes. They can be seen in hospitals such as AIIMS and Malkhan Singh Hospital. What more do they need?"

Gautam also said a large space had already been given and alleged that encroachments had taken place during the Samajwadi Party's tenure. He added that festivals such as Holi and Diwali were celebrated by Hindus in homes and neighbourhoods, unlike Eid prayers where people gathered at one place. "I don't even know that festival, Eid. You mentioned something like Ramzan — I don't know about it. But our Holi and Diwali are very big festivals for Hindus, and they are celebrated on a large scale," he said.

In the letter, AIMIM sought permission to hold prayers at Numaish Ground stating that Aligarh's growing population had put pressure on existing prayer venues.

(With inputs from Arun Singh in Aligarh)

Finally, Bombay HC settles property fight dragging on for 76 yrs

Mumbai: A family property dispute that began before the Bombay HC just two weeks after the Constitution came into force has finally ended 76 years later. On Feb 27, the court ordered the partition of the remaining one acre land in Yerawada, Pune, among the heirs of landowner MMH Janmohamed, who had left behind two large plots, including one on Deccan College Road, reports **Swati Deshpande.**

In a judgment made available on March 11, Justice Farhan Dubash brought closure to the decades-long legal battle between two sets of heirs. The dispute dates back to Feb 8, 1950, when Ebrahim Chotani and other heirs filed a suit against Osman Chotani — another heir — seeking partition and their shares in the properties. In March 1950, the HC appointed a court receiver to manage the disputed properties, permitted their sale, and later that month directed a preliminary partition. The state govt acquired the Deccan College Road plot, and compensation was distributed among the heirs by the court receiver in 1979. What remained in dispute was a 16 acre plot in Yerawada.

The case became complicated when the heirs of a manager appointed by the landowner during his lifetime claimed rights over the property. Another individual also claimed ownership, citing adverse possession. In 1952, the court receiver filed a suit in a Pune civil court seeking possession of the land.In 1984, HC again directed demarcation of the land. Eventually, only two parcels remained in dispute: a one-acre plot and a 3-acre plot in Yerawada.

Maya demands Bharat Ratna for Kanshi Ram; Rahul also writes to PM

Lucknow: BSP chief Mayawati Sunday urged the Centre to confer Bharat Ratna on party founder Kanshi Ram and not make the same mistake Congress made with BR Ambedkar. On the birth anniversary of Kanshi Ram, she attacked SP, Congress and BJP, saying they only talk about Bahujans, but rarely work for their uplift.

"The Muslim community has significantly dissociated itself from these parties, and with the Brahmins associating with BSP, it seems that SP's political and caste-animosity have intensified," she said. Mayawati hailed Kanshi Ram for his work for an egalitarian society and urged the BJP-led Centre to bestow the highest civilian award on him. "Like Congress, which did not honour the architect of India's Constitution, Babasaheb Dr Bhimrao Ambedkar, with Bharat Ratna, the current BJP-NDA govt at the Centre should not delay any further honouring 'Bahujan' leader Kanshi Ram ji with the Bharat Ratna.

Rahul Gandhi also urged PM Modi to confer Bharat Ratna posthumously on Kanshi Ram. He argued that because of Kanshi Ram's efforts, people who had never considered entering public life began to see politics as a means to achieve justice and equality. TNN

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CHANGE OF NAME

I NAZEER AHAMED HUNASANAHALLI MAIN ROAD HOSADURGA KANAKAPURA RAMANAGAR-562119 have changed my name to NAZEER AHMED vide affidavit 26-02-2026 before Notary A.R. Muneer Ahmed # 4932 Blore.

I, Service No. JC 74304 M, Rank Sub Maj (Hony Capt) Name I.B. MONNAPPA, son of I.K.Belliappa, aged about 84 years, Residing at Subhash Nagar, M. Badaga village, Murnad Post, Madikeri Taluk, Kodagu District -571252, have changed my daughter's name from IM Parvathi to PARVATHY I M vide affidavit dated 13.03.2026 Sworn before notary: Daya D B, Madikeri

I Priti Tarachand Panchariya W/o Tarachand Panchariya, Flat# 303, Kristal Topaz Aprt 64/2, Garvebhavipalya, Hongasandra, 9th Main, Bangalore -560114 have changed my name to Preeti Panchariya for all future purposes

I, NAGESWARA RAO S/o NARASOJIRAO GUZZAR, R/o F-1001, Gulmohar, Adarsh Palm Retreat, Bellandur, Bangalore-560103, aged 63 years, hereby declare that all my names i.e., NAGESWARA RAO, NAGESH, NAGESHWARA RAO, NAGESWARA GUZZAR RAO, NAGESWARARAO GUZZAR are the names of one and the same person. For all future purposes, I shall be known as NAGESWARA RAO vide affidavit dated 14/03/2026 sworn before notary K. V. MANI, Bangalore.

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All's Unfair in War?

CITY CITY BANG BANG

SANTOSH DESAI

At one level, one can think of the Iran war in familiar terms. The parallels with the WMD-driven Iraq wars are many. The same device of a prefigured justification, the gradual escalation of involvement, the same dubious claims amplified by media and so on. And yet there is something very different at work. For the world that existed in 2003 has changed beyond recognition.

This is not a column about the Iran war per se. It is about what it says about where we are in terms of the civilisational bargain we have lived by. Over the last few centuries, we have developed a protocol of managing differences, one that rested on a balance between the raw impulses of power and self-interest and the gloved fictions of diplomacy, international law and norms of engagement. They acted as a layer of protective padding that converted confrontation into conversation, or at least the possibility of one. They were not always successful, but they established a sense of order, of laying down a way in which we could disagree and still carry on.

That seems to have collapsed today. The engineered pretence that we could negotiate our way out of conflict, that treaties meant something, that strength was not a device to dissolve the possibility of dialogue. Even when their actions spoke otherwise, the appearance of a rules-based order was maintained. Some things were simply not said, some lines not crossed.

These have been tossed aside like a costume that has outlived its purpose, without being replaced by a rival set of order-making mechanisms.

The new order, or more correctly disorder, finds its most visceral expression in Iran. The attack was launched not because diplomacy failed but because the strong grew impatient with the enactment of diplomacy. It was a charade they had little belief in, for the action was predetermined. A breakthrough seemed imminent when the next move was announced by a missile.

This was not about one side breaking the rules but about the very idea that there should be rules being dismissed outright. What has replaced the old grammar is something more elemental, more primal. The strong have the right to dominate, the weak must acknowledge their subordinate position and pay tribute to the strong. Power is self-justifying, and truth is what follows suit, tail between its legs. This is a world where action has meaning, not consequences. The primal sees consequences as an inevitable outcome of decisive action; in that sense, the desired consequence is embedded in the action, as per this view of the world.

What we see today is a relentless state of arousal that gets no pushback. This is anger as a sign of consumption, that is kept on boil and is looking for a target to vent itself. For all its hypocrisies, the old civilisational architecture had a system in place. We could agree on some shared principles that underpinned our actions

These are not new impulses, but they were never presented as nakedly. As a civilisation, we strove to transcend these, in words and through fictions of protocol. The intention was always to find higher ground. That is no longer the case.

A lot of this change can be attributed to the way technology has been shaping society. For most of modern civilisation, the rules that governed public life were created by relatively small groups who believed they possessed a vantage point above the crowd. Kings, diplomats, editors, jurists, intellectuals and bureaucrats fashioned the codes that organised power. They constructed institutions, procedures and protocols that translated raw force into something that appeared legitimate.

By arming everyone with a voice that is possible to express with immediacy, anonymity and the ability to get recirculated, the cost of reacting through primal impulse has been reduced to nearly zero while the social consequences that once acted as restraints have all but disappeared. Additionally, these behaviours are rewarded by the algorithm, which is an engagement-seeking missile that works best with hate as a warhead.

Originally, such unmediated impulses did not have a way to get broadcast, and even when they erupted, they were episodic and self-exhausting. They occurred in bursts— a bout of anger, an uprising, something said in haste. What we see today is a relentless state of arousal that gets no pushback. This is anger as a sign of consumption, that is kept on boil and is looking for a target to vent itself. For all its hypocrisies, the old civilisational architecture had a system in place. We could agree on some shared principles that underpinned our actions. What was covert yesterday has not only become overt but celebrated.

Trump embodies this new culture, even if he might merely be the instrument through which this shift has found its most strident advocate. He has simply disregarded all the elaborate protocols that were put in place, using his power, both legitimate and usurped, to act out of an impulse that owes no explanations. He has replaced the performance of propriety with the performance of the raw heat of impulse. This is read as authenticity by many who were disillusioned with the meagre returns that conventional politics and diplomacy have yielded.

The old order was built by the few speaking for the many, and it held because the many, for the most part, did not have the means or the platform to challenge the establishment. Today the many have both. And what they are producing is not an alternative order but the absence of order: the primal uncontained, recirculating endlessly, building nothing, settling nothing, but gathering terrifying momentum.

We are watching something crumble, without anything that we can believe in taking its place. In an earlier world, the show of strength by the powerful could be absorbed as each reality was local, but in a hyper-connected world, one side's strength can very easily translate into everyone's weakness. Which is what we are seeing today.

santosh365@gmail.com

In a first, India to map its manuscript heritage from today

Ambika.Pandit
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New Delhi: In a first-of-its-kind exercise that starts on Monday, the ministry of culture will launch a three-month-long nationwide survey to map India's manuscript heritage.

From the district level upwards, the extensive exercise aims to locate all manuscripts in different parts of the country and create a consolidated database and a national digital repository of the same on a central portal of 'Gyan Bharatam Mission'.

The manuscripts existing in collections and institutions and those identified during the survey with individual custodians will also be geotagged to address conservation, preservation and digitisation requirements.

Culture secretary Vivek Aggarwal said the survey teams would use the Gyan Bharatam app to upload the details and technology will be leveraged going forward to enable digitisation in a standardised format to eventually make them accessible.

The exercise aims to locate manuscripts across the country and create a national digital repository on the 'Gyan Bharatam Mission' portal

The survey is in keeping with the vision document , New Delhi Declaration, adopted in Sept last year at the Gyan Bharatam conference in Vigyan Bhawan, where PM Narendra Modi had said the mission would be the "proclamation of India's culture, literature and consciousness".

Noting that India had the world's largest collection of estimated manusc-ripts (about 1 crore), the Prime Minister had said their digitisation under the 'Gyan Bharatam Mission', which was announced in the 2025-26 Budget, would also curb "intellectual piracy".

Pak terrorist killed, infiltration bid foiled

Srinagar: Army and police foiled an infiltration bid along LoC in J&K's Uri sector, killing a Pakistani terrorist early Sunday, **reports Naseer Ganai.** "Based on specific intelligence input provided by J&K police, a joint operation was launched. When challenged, the terrorist opened indiscriminate fire, prompting security forces to return fire," Chinar Corps of Army said.

Ladakh bodies ask protesters to raise only approved slogans

Naseer.Ganai
@timesofindia.com

Srinagar: Leh Apex Body (LAB) and Kargil Democratic Alliance (KDA) issued a set of guidelines for protesters on Sunday, on the eve of a protest urging the Centre to resume dialogue on the demand for statehood for Ladakh and its inclusion under Sixth Schedule of the Constitution.

The organisations have asked participants of the protest on Monday to stick only to approved slogans and not to mask their faces. LAB said it has not called for a market shutdown. However, shopkeepers who wish to voluntarily close their shops and join the march are free to do so.

On Friday, the union territory administration appealed to LAB to reconsider the proposed March 16 procession, saying it remained committed to dialogue. The govt said the tourist season is about to begin and such a protest could create a negative impression about the situation in the region.

The last dialogue between Ladakhi representatives and Union home ministry's high-powered committee was held on Feb 4.

The UT administration is wary of such protests as last year on Sept 24, police opened fire on protesters, killing four and injuring over 80 in Leh.

After the Union govt ordered an inquiry into the Sept 24 police firing, ministry of home affairs panel and Ladakhi representatives held the first round of talks in New Delhi on Oct 22 last year.

Bus plunges off mountain in Nepal, 7 Indian pilgrims dead

Kathmandu: A passenger bus carrying Indian pilgrims slipped off a mountain road and rolled down its slopes in central Nepal on Saturday night, killing seven people and leaving nine injured, police said here on Sunday.

All seven killed were Indian. Seven other Indian pilgrims were injured and taken to nearby hospital. The other two hurt were the Nepali bus driver and his assistant.

The bus was returning from Manakamana Temple. The accident occurred on a path leading from the highway to the temple near Shahid Lakhan village, about 120km west of the capital, Kathmandu. The vehicle was going downhill when it slipped off a curve and rolled down the mountainside about 150m before landing in a ravine. Police and villagers rushed to the site and pulled the injured out of the wreckage and helped transport them in ambulances. PTI

Travancore palace heist: ₹2 crore jewellery stolen

TIMES NEWS NETWORK

Thiruvananthapuram: Jewellery worth over Rs 2 crore has allegedly been stolen from Kowdiar Palace, the official residence of Travancore royal family. Based on a complaint filed by senior family member Aswathi Thirunal Gowri Lakshmi Bai, Peroorkada police registered a case of theft and began an investigation.

The ornaments, reportedly kept in an iron cupboard in the complainant's bedroom, are suspected to have been stolen between Oct and Nov 2025. The family initially believed the jewellery had been misplaced and approached police only after it could not be traced, the complainant told officers.

The stolen jewellery included several traditional gold ornaments that had been heirlooms of the royal household for decades. Among them were gold chains embedded with orange coral beads and gold pearls, anklets featuring the traditional 'pichipoo mottu' design, and those studded with black and gold beads.

The ornaments were reportedly kept in an iron cupboard in **Aswathi Thirunal Gowri Lakshmi Bayi**'s bedroom and they are suspected to be stolen between Oct and Nov 2025. The family initially believed the jewellery was misplaced and approached police after it could not be traced

Police said the missing items also included broad gold bangles with leaf motifs, twisted gold bangles, and large gold earrings studded with red stones. Some of the ornaments reportedly had precious stones such as rubies, coral, and diamonds embedded in them.

Investigators said many of the ornaments had significant historical and cultural value, with some reflecting traditional Travancore craftsmanship and temple-inspired designs that are rarely made today. Among them is a gold pendant engraved with the image of Lord Padmanabha, attached to a delicate gold chain.

Rare gold necklaces, antique ornaments believed to have been preserved across generations, a set of gold coins, and other jewellery pieces brought from abroad were also among the missing items.

Police suspect the theft may have been carried out by persons familiar with the palace premises.

Officers said it would be difficult for someone unfamiliar with the building to reach the bedroom and locate the cupboard where the ornaments were kept.

Police said several videos showing the interiors of the palace recently surfaced on social media, suggesting that outsiders might have entered the premises. They are probing possible security lapses and questioning individuals who had access to the palace during the period when the theft is believed to have taken place.

Excise policy case: Del HC declines transfer request, AAP moves SC

TIMES NEWS NETWORK

New Delhi: Citing the roster based system for allocation of cases to judges, Chief Justice of Delhi high court, DK Upadhyay, declined a request made by former chief minister and Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) national convenor **Arvind Kejriwal** to transfer the excise policy appeal by CBI from justice Swarana Kanta Sharma, who is currently hearing it, to another bench.

Kejriwal has now approached the Supreme Court with a transfer petition, AAP functionaries said.

In a communication issued to Kejriwal and others, who sent a representation to him on the administrative side, Chief Justice Upadhyaya pointed out that the matter has already been assigned to the judge concerned as per the existing roster, and there is no ground to order a transfer.

"The petition is assigned to the Hon'ble judge as per the current roster. Any call of recusal has to be taken by the Hon'ble judge. I, however, do not find any reason to transfer the petition by passing an order on the administrative side," the response said. The development was confirmed by sources in the AAP. The CBI's appeal is listed for hearing before Justice Sharma on Monday. Former deputy CM Manish Sisodia, meanwhile, has challenged the notice issued to him by the HC in the CBI appeal.

On February 27, a Delhi court discharged Kejriwal, Sisodia and 21 other accused in the excise policy case, before the start of trial and at the stage of framing of charges. In a nearly 600-page order, the court questioned the evidence presented by CBI in the case and also rejected allegations of an 'overarching conspiracy' or 'criminal intent' in framing the Delhi excise policy. The court recommended departmental proceedings against the investigating officer.

CBI then approached the Delhi High Court in appeal against the Rouse Avenue Court's order, calling it "illegal on the face of it". It also alleged that the court had conducted a "mini-trial" and had disregarded a "duly established" conspiracy.

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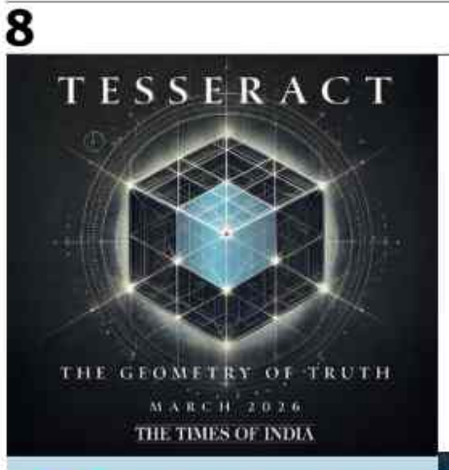


ATTUNE TO THE FOURTH DIMENSION

The story of humankind underlines that truth has more facets than are normally perceived. **Tesseract: The Geometry of Truth**, unveiled through allegory and animation, movement and music, colour and contemplation shows that our future survival hinges on pure intelligence being tempered by empathy

I have always been an ardent fan of theatre and musicals. In the '80s and '90s I used to watch them in America and London, and I often wondered when India would present something of this quality, in choreography, music and production. Today I am delighted. Congratulations to The Times of India and the entire team for this presentation. It has philosophy, it speaks about women's empowerment and it explores the idea of truth behind the truth

Subhash Ghai
FILMMAKER

I was absolutely enthralled by the whole concept. It's a wonderful recap of how The Times of India started and how it has evolved from the 19th century until today. In many ways it summarises what has been happening in the world, and it has been presented beautifully. It's also nostalgic for me because it reminds us how things have evolved over the years. Print media today is more digital, but I'll be honest. If I don't read The Times of India, my day feels incomplete

Madhur Bhandarkar | FILMMAKER

Tesseract is technically one of the finest productions that you will see anywhere in the world. Avant-garde in its presentation, deeply philosophical in its musings, it is multi-layered with meaning for a purpose. This production is a rare theatre event

Feroz Abbas Khan
THEATRE/FILM DIRECTOR

Beautifully curated history of a legacy. Sustained with Truth. In the Times that were, the Times that are, and the Times to come…

Geetanjali Kirloskar | INDUSTRIALIST

What we saw was unbelievable. It was very well done. The central theme is truth and courage, which is what The Times of India represents. Let truth prevail. And the show expresses that magnificently

Deepak Parekh
FORMER CHAIRMAN, HDFC

The Times of India archive has these amazing old photographs. Each one tells a story of how India has evolved. The whole atmosphere here is very artistic. There is a sense of opera and glamour, and almost everyone seems to have embraced that spirit in their attire and persona

Gulshan Grover | ACTOR

Huma Qureshi at the display of TOI archives

The show reminds us of the importance of introspection. We shouldn't simply go through life like robots without recognising the impact of our actions. What we are living today — the wars, global events, technological change — will one day be in textbooks. Our generation has witnessed so many transformations and we must ensure we leave a good future for the next generation

Poonam Dhillon | ACTOR

It has been a bit of a mystery for everyone attending the show, the title and the meaning behind it. It's interesting to see how each of us might understand the idea of truth differently. I think discovering that through the evening is quite exciting

Tara Sutaria | ACTOR

Reshmi Dasgupta

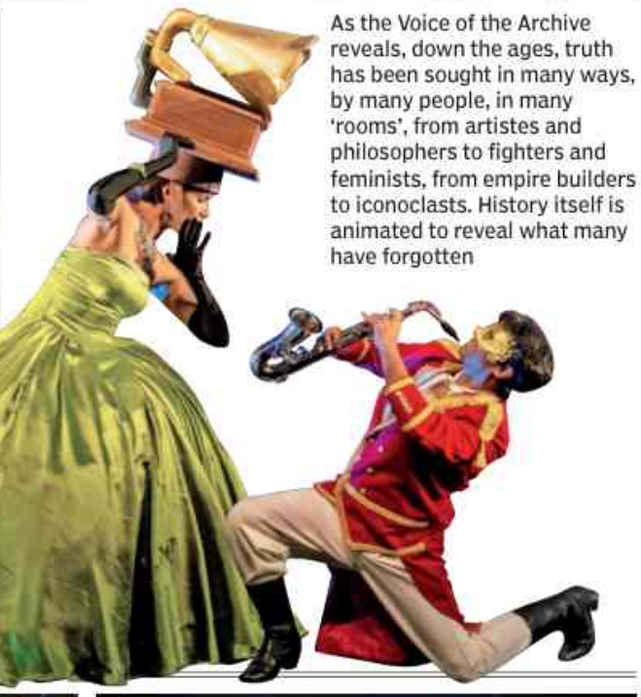
We live in the age of information. It comes at us from all directions, enveloping and overwhelming, an accumulation and consequence of the sum total of human experience and endeavour. It is exhilarating and disorienting, often both at the same time. Yet the human mind has always been on a quest for truth, seeking it in a myriad ways since before the dawn of history and expressing it just as diversely. But we have been limited by our own power of perception.

The patterns of successive epochs—the archives of human ambition and enterprise—are there as prescient, silent witnesses around us. Who or what can analyse and interpret their geometry? The human mind can, but to do so, it needs to become aware of and open to the fourth dimension that parallels our 3D world, always offering perspective and choice. Its possibilities are embodied in the Tesseract, a theoretical 4D hypercube that exists only in abstraction.

As a chronicler, The Times of India has built a matchless archive of the human story over the past 187 years. Its news headlines, articles and photographs have borne witness to and documented countless quests. Now The Times of India has taken the human story to the next plane by conceptualising Tesseract: The Geometry of Truth, to reveal the possibilities of alternative choices via story, song and dance—all time-rested facets of human creativity—at the NCPA in Mumbai.

It is not easy to open minds, and nor is the fourth dimension a simple construct. But there is epiphany in journeying with Sophia and her alter ego through the ages of human history wherein advances in art, literature and the sciences were matched by exploitation of our planet and people, where revolution and evolution were not on the same track yet there was an inexorable onward march. And somewhere along the way, compassion fell by the wayside.

As colour and rhythm pulsate on the stage, expressing human thoughts and emotions in its many shapes with glorious Broadway panache, the contours of true sapience emerge. Truth finally reveals itself as a Tesseract—tangible yet metaphysical, radiating a mysterious force that can be called empathy. That it awaits us in the fourth dimension, at the edge of human perception becomes blindingly apt. Sophia finds her truth; we need to seek ours too.



As the Voice of the Archive reveals, down the ages, truth has been sought in many ways, by many people, in many 'rooms', from artistes and philosophers to fighters and feminists, from empire builders to iconoclasts. History itself is animated to reveal what many have forgotten

In each 'room' of human history, Sophia encounters different versions of herself and changing perceptions of truth. Eventually she awakens to an all-seeing and all-knowing presence around her, guiding her to the fourth dimension

Photos: Uma Kadam, Prathamesh Bandekar & Sanjay Hadkar

The Earth's progress has been both successful and wounding and finally Sophia realises courage, empathy and beauty must round out the cold efficiency of reason. That she and the rest of humankind need to attune to the fourth dimension, the Tesseract

Bengal poll limited to 2 phases to thwart intimidation: Officials

'Will Hamper Movement Of Hired Goons'

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ANI

CEC Gyanesh Kumar and EC Vivek Joshi announcing the schedule for the assembly elections at a press conference in New Delhi on Sunday

New Delhi: The two-phase polling in West Bengal spread over just one week — making it the state's most compact in recent memory — is aimed at curbing intimidation of electors and polling personnel by unruly elements allegedly hired and groomed by parties to influence the outcome in their favour, **TOI** has learnt.

Election Commission sources explained that unruly elements, enjoying patronage of the party in office, usually move in between phases from one poll-going area to another and resort to malpractices known in local parlance as 'chhapa' — wherein the polling parties are threatened inside polling stations and votes cast through impersonation; booth jamming — a practice followed in rural areas where electors are asked not to go to polling stations by citing violence, disorder or some blockage along the access route; and source/gate jamming — wherein electors in urban areas are discouraged from venturing out of their homes for voting, on the pretext that their votes have already been cast by others.

In the latter two cases, most prefer to stay back, strangely to avoid explaining to poll officials why they are not the one impersonating.

The sources said the larger the number of phases, as in the past, the easier it was for the limited force of unruly elements to move from one area to another, maximising coverage to "intimidate electors and polling personnel". The two polling dates — April 23, covering 152 assembly constituencies (ACs); and April 29, covering the remaining 142 ACs — would spread the "unruly force" thin, limiting their potential to sabotage the elections and influence the voting pattern in favour of a particular party outside their "local area". There will be 100% webcasting from inside polling stations, they said.

A key enabler of EC in restricting the Bengal poll to just two phases is the good availability of central armed police forces (CAPFs). Sources indicated that nearly 1,600-2,000 companies of CAPFs — comprising around 1.5-1.8 lakh personnel — may be deployed in the state. While nearly 500 companies are already in Bengal on advance deployment, an additional 1,000-1,500 companies shall be stationed there before April 23. In fact, forces deployed in Assam will move to Bengal soon after the northeastern state completes polling on April 9.

Didi's sops not a violation of poll code: EC

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New Delhi: Election Commission on Sunday said announcements and policy decisions before the poll announcement are a prerogative of the govt in office — Centre or state. The model code of conduct, prohibiting any new announcement by a govt, comes into effect only from the time of the official announcement of election dates, the panel said while declaring the assembly poll schedule for West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Assam, Kerala, and Puducherry.

Responding to questions on whether announcements, including dearness allowance for state govt employees, made by Bengal CM **Mamata Banerjee** less than an hour before EC announced the poll schedule are a violation, CEC Gyanesh Kumar said, "The model code of conduct comes into effect after the announcement of polls and not before."

There have been instances of incumbent govts announcing decisions, including financial assistance to beneficiaries, just before the code kicked in, and opposition parties have often termed these as "inducements" to influence voting. On Sunday, several reporters mentioned the Rs 10,000 financial help extended to women by the Nitish Kumar govt in Bihar just before the 2025 assembly election, and the M K Stalin govt in TN depositing Rs 6,550 crore into the bank accounts of over 1.3 crore women as of Feb.

Mamata, who is TMC chief, announced dearness allowance for thousands of state govt employees on X, saying they "will start receiving their ROPA 2009 DA arrears from March 2026 onwards as per the modalities detailed out in notifications issued by our finance department."

Calling the DA announcement a "joke", Bengal BJP's Suvendu Adhikari said on X, "After years of looting the state treasury and cheating them blind, this is your desperate last-minute poll gimmick? Zero accountability, zero funds, zero delivery... Classic TMC poll drama."

TWO MAIN RIVALS ENTER THE RING WITH VARYING DEGREES OF HOPE

April polls will test if BJP can win over 'unfriendly' territory

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New Delhi: If assembly polls since the Lok Sabha elections in 2024 reiterated BJP's dominance and deflated hopes of its rivals emboldened by their LS poll bump, the fresh round of electoral battle will test the party's mettle and determine if it can build on its momentum to make new strides in regions considered most unfriendly to its overtures so far.

The poll announcement comes amid the opposition's united attack on Modi govt over trade agreement with the US, energy concerns due to the West Asian crisis, and SIR of electoral rolls exercise, and the elections will offer a window into the popular mood.

BJP is going to the poll in Assam, where it has been in power since 2016, with confidence, and to Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and especially West Bengal, with varying degrees of hope, three states it has never governed. More than Congress, it is regional parties which have proved resilient against BJP, and two of BJP's most vocal critics, CM Mamata Banerjee in Bengal and CM M K Stalin in TN, are in the fray in this round of polls.

BJP is in office in only one of the four poll-bound states, while it is part of the governing alliance in the poll-bound UT of Puducherry. Outside Assam, BJP has the highest stake in neighbouring Bengal, where it is the direct challenger to TMC, while the party has taken the lead in stitching together an alliance under AIADMK's leadership to take on the DMK-led bloc in TN.

In Kerala, the electoral battle is largely between the incumbent CPM-led LDF and the Congress-UDF, but BJP, which pulled nearly 17% of the vote share in 2024, is being seen as an X factor that will influence the final outcome.

As is often the case, PM **Narendra Modi** has led BJP's pre-poll outreach by mixing the launch of development programmes with political rallies in all these states, with Bengal being his last port of call, where he addressed a rally in Kolkata Saturday.

BJP believes its campaign around Hindu consciousness amid concerns over infiltration and TMC's alleged pro-Muslim politics and misrule has taken root in the state and will help make up for what it may lack in organisational machinery against its rival's well-oiled network. The PM's attack on the Bengal CM, that she was working to reduce Hindus to a minority in the state, was sharper than usual "appeasement" charge BJP has levelled against her.

In office since 2011, Mamata has thwarted BJP after being surprised by its performance in 2019 LS election when it won its best-ever tally of 18 seats against TMC's 22. However, its steady 38-39% vote share in the last several polls has given BJP a launchpad to make a serious and determined bid to vanquish her.

Under Assam CM Himanta Biswa Sarma, BJP has turned the alleged infiltration from Bangladesh into a resonant poll issue in the northeastern state and mixed this with native appeal.

Cong banks on Kerala to end its long season of electoral upsets

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New Delhi: Congress's fortunes post-2014 have followed a familiar pattern: rout in the national elections and then a long wait for assembly wins. It was an extended barren patch of three and a half years before Congress won a state poll (Himachal) after being routed in the Pulwama-dictated 2019 Lok Sabha contest.

This time, Congress is hoping that the wait — which should have ended immediately after the 2024 LS polls with wins in Haryana and then Maharashtra — will finally be over through a win in Kerala. The polls in four states and one UT are an opportunity for Congress to get back into the reckoning, which the party prematurely hoped that the creditable performance in the difficult 2024 polls would ensure.

If Kerala-2026 is the essence of Congress's stakes in the coming battles, the principal opposition party is aiming to score significant political points in Assam, TN and Bengal, given that arch-rival BJP has positioned itself as a player across the national geography. After all, in the years since the Modi-led party turned into a political juggernaut, the **Rahul Gandhi**-run Congress has chosen to define itself ideologically and in sole opposition to BJP — a process which has also led to greater convergence among foes within the secular camp.

For once, Congress ended the longstanding dichotomy of being an ally of CPM at the national level and in Bengal, while being a rival in Kerala — which provided BJP with an easy line of attack. It decided early to go solo in Bengal.

Like many of the 'Congress vs BJP' fields, Assam has turned barren for the former with back-to-back defeats. Communal polarisation, marginalisation via defections and Assam-specific delimitation have made its political task a challenge. Congress belatedly plumped for Gaurav Gogoi, a young face with socio-political pedigree, as its flag-bearer. By all indications, Congress is hoping for a respectable performance that can debunk the growing perception of Assam becoming a one-party turf and keep the party alive in the state.

After an unexpected public squabbling with DMK, Congress settled for a minor seat share for the polls. Given that BJP has inserted itself in the AIADMK-led bloc, and speculations are rife that TVK of Tamil superstar, Vijay, can be "influenced" by BJP after elections, Congress is eager that DMK sails through. The post-Jayalalithaa landscape in the state has proved easier for DMK, as witnessed in the 2024 LS polls, but TVK's emergence and the prospect of a three-way split of votes have created uncertainty.

Reduced to less than a fringe player in Mamata Banerjee's fief, Bengal Congress is moving with a two-fold target in its solo run. The party believes it cannot go below 2021's pathetic result of zero seats and 3% votes. AICC state in-charge Ghulam Ahmad Mir said the party's vote share should move upwards of 15%.

Assam signs pacts with groups, marks end of 'ethnic militancy'

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Guwahati: Assam's BJP govt on Sunday signed memorandums of settlement (MoS) with three Kuki militant groups and one Hmar outfit, with an official statement declaring that the two agreements mark the end of "ethnic militancy" in the state.

The pacts offer welfare and development councils for Kuki and Hmar communities, with headquarters in Guwahati. The four groups had laid down arms in 2012 in the presence of top central and state authorities, signing a Suspension of Operations (SoO) pact. The groups were United Kukigam Defence Army (UKDA), Kuki Revolutionary Army (KRA), Kuki Liberation Organisation (KLO)/Kuki Liberation Army (KLA), and Hmar People's Convention-Democratic (HPC-D). The govt has promised the groups that their cadres would be rehabilitated and kin of militants killed would receive compensation.

In poll-bound Assam, Shah plays B'desh infiltrators card

Kangkan Kalita & Mukut Das | TNN

Guwahati: Union home minister Amit Shah accused Congress of turning Assam into a "safe haven for infiltrators" and launched a string of projects in the state on Sunday, hours before Election Commission announced the assembly election schedule.

Shah is felicitated at a BJP youth event in Guwahati. Congress is against SIR as infiltrators are being removed from rolls, he said

Shah alleged that Congress MP Rahul Gandhi opposed the SIR of electoral rolls because "names of infiltrators were being removed." He said, "Every infiltrator will eventually have to leave the country."

He also targeted Rahul over his "chai-pakoda" protest on the Parliament steps and criticised Congress demonstration at AI Summit in Delhi, alleging that such actions "defamed India globally". He accused the opposition of damaging India's image.

Shah alleged that previous Congress govts had siphoned off Rs 150 crore a year from health budget during their 15 years in power and contrasted that with BJP's expansion of medical colleges, seats, and cancer care facilities.

He inaugurated and launched healthcare projects worth Rs 2,092 crore, including Pragjyotishpur Medical College and Hospital in Guwahati. He also virtually opened cancer centres in Golaghat and Tinsukia, laid the foundation for super-speciality hospitals in Diphu, Jorhat, and Barpeta, and announced a Swasthya Bhawan in Guwahati and a district hospital in Abhayapuri.

Citing higher institutional deliveries and improvements in infant and maternal mortality indicators, Shah credited CM Himanta Biswa Sarma with bringing Assam's healthcare system "on a par with Gujarat, Maharashtra, and Karnataka."

At BJYM's Yuva Shakti Samaroh, attended by over 1.5 lakh youths, Shah called the gathering a "Mahakumbh of Yuvas" and predicted the "largest-ever mandate" for BJP in Assam. He also highlighted peace accords with insurgent groups, from Bodo Accord in 2020 to ULFA agreement in 2024, and said more than 10,800 weapons had been surrendered, bringing an end to decades of militancy.

CPM names 81 candidates for Kerala polls; UDF confident of win

T'puram/ Kochi: CPM on Sunday announced it will contest 86 assembly seats in Kerala and named 81 candidates, including six CPM-backed independents and 10 women. Soon after, many CPM candidates took to the streets, organised rallies, and began campaigning on Sunday itself.

CPM state secretary M V Govindan said that of the 86 candidates, 75 will be from the party. Independent candidates in five constituencies — Koduvally, Kottakkal, Palakkad, Kondotty, and Tirur — will be named later, he added. Chief minister Pinarayi Vijayan will contest from Dharmadom. Eleven of his cabinet colleagues and 54 sitting MLAs will also contest again.

However, Congress leader VD Satheesan Sunday claimed that UDF will form a govt in the state. He said UDF's full list of candidates will be released on Monday. The selection of candidates is focused on winnability, he told a press conference in Kochi. TNN

For Left, Kerala is the red fort that must not fall

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New Delhi: For the Left, its most crucial battle is in Kerala, as the CPM-led LDF fights for a return to power in the last Communist-governed state, which goes to polls with West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Assam and Puducherry.

With a resurgent UDF stepping up its attack on the two-term CPM-led govt in Kerala and BJP appearing to be making inroads, the assembly polls in the state will be a critical test for the Left parties

In Bengal — where it was once the dominant force and now lacks any presence in terms of MLAs and MPs from the state — it is striving for a revival. And in Tamil Nadu, it is putting up a fight to ensure the return of the DMK-led alliance, of which CPM and CPI are a part.

The Left parties, including CPI(ML), are also gearing up for a fight against BJP as part of the Congress-led alliance in Assam. They will focus on reaching the working class, Dalits and other backward classes in all the poll-bound states.

General secretaries of CPM and CPI(ML) Liberation, MA Baby and Dipankar Bhattacharya, respectively, highlighted that the goal is to expand the footprint of the Left, weaken BJP where it is in power and ensure that the latter does not grow stronger in opposition-ruled states like Kerala and Tamil Nadu.

Emphasising the outreach by the Left parties, CPI's D Raja said BJP stands exposed for its failures on the economy, employment generation, inflation and foreign policy.

Baby admitted that while there is a "stiff fight" in Kerala, "we are confident that people will see all that the LDF govt has done and not be swayed by the narratives of UDF and BJP. We are also going to the people and are open to criticism to understand their concerns and address them."

With a resurgent UDF stepping up its attack on the two-term CPM-led govt in Kerala and a BJP seen to be making inroads, the assembly polls in the state will be a critical test for the Left parties. A loss will put a big question mark over the Left's relevance in the INDIA bloc, nationally.

Meanwhile, in a bid to steer a revival in West Bengal and mark its presence as the third force in the contest, the Left front is going to the polls as a broader coalition which has CPI(ML) — unlike in the previous assembly elections — and some non-Left players too.

Inclusion of 'doubtful electors' in rolls will be on judges' orders: CEC

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Praising the SIR and calling it a 'massive democratic exercise', the CEC said it has delivered a pure electoral roll, 'a bedrock of democracy'

New Delhi: Calcutta HC holds the key to whether nearly 45 lakh 'doubtful electors' will be able to participate in the Bengal assembly elections — their cases being adjudicated by judicial officers in line with SC's Feb directives. Of the 60 lakh 'doubtful elector' cases, 15 lakh have been adjudicated so far, according to reports.

CEC **Gyanesh Kumar** on Sunday said the "learned judges" working as per the HC's directions will be putting out the supplementary list of names approved for inclusion in the state electoral roll, following which EC will add them back to the final roll. The electors added shall be eligible to vote in the upcoming poll in the state.

Praising SIR and calling it a "massive democratic exercise", Kumar said it has delivered a pure electoral roll, "a bedrock of democracy", in line with Article 326.

An EC official, however, said the rules require the voters' list to be frozen on the last date of nomination, with additions allowed till 10 days before that, leaving the remaining period for possible appeals. There is a provision for a two-point appeal process against final roll entries, the first point being the district magistrate and the second and final one, the chief electoral officer of the state or UT concerned.

This means that the roll may be frozen on March 27 in respect of 152 assembly constituencies of Bengal covered in the first phase of polling on April 23, and on April 1 for 142 seats scheduled to go to polls on April 29.

PM writes to Birla: Oppn can't accept rise of a new person

TIMES NEWS NETWORK

In a letter to leaders of different political parties, Birla underlined his concern over protests on Parl premises in violation of rules and called for discipline

New Delhi: PM Narendra Modi said on Sunday political parties driven by selfish interests and arrogance have been targeting the position of Lok Sabha Speaker since 2014, when he first came to power and Sumitra Mahajan occupied the chair, and accused them of being unable to digest the ascendancy of a new leader.

"Some people with nepotistic and feudal mindset look at democratic institutions through their narrow mindset. They cannot easily accept the rise of any new person," he wrote to Birla days after an opposition-supported motion for his removal was defeated and painted his opponents as viscerally antagonistic to occupants of high offices unaffiliated to them.

While Modi took aim at Congress and its allies for turning their democratic disagreement into disrespect for institutions and praised Birla's emphasis on no one being above rules in his statement after the motion's defeat, the Speaker, in turn, lauded the PM's commitment to democratic values.

With the governing NDA rallying to his defence and Modi himself taking the lead, Birla also wrote a letter to leaders of different political parties, underlining his concern over protests inside and outside Parliament in violation of rules and calling for discipline, in a message pointedly aimed at opposition MPs who have been bringing banners and placards to Lok Sabha and demonstrating at the main entrance of the House.

Some members, he said, are dealing a blow to the dignity of parliamentary democracy. "The time has come when we need to do serious reflection and introspection to maintain the dignity and prestige of our democratic institutions. In particular, the leadership of all political parties and their leaders in the House will have to make special efforts to ensure discipline and high moral conduct inside the House and within the Parliament complex among their members," he said.

The letters, from Modi to Birla and then from Birla to political parties, come amid frequent protests from opposition MPs in Lok Sabha, which have often led to untimely adjournments.

In his reply thanking Modi, Birla praised his unwavering trust in democratic rules and traditions, saying he has practised them through his long public life, including as Gujarat CM. "You have always put deep trust in the parliamentary values of dialogue, debate and deliberations," he told Modi.

Modi praised Birla for his statement in Lok Sabha on Friday in which he had emphasised that the rules are same for all and leader of opposition Rahul Gandhi will not get any special privilege.

DA announcement a 'classic TMC poll drama', says BJP

▸ Continued from page 1

Bengal govt employees and pensioners "will start receiving their ROPA (Revision of Pay and Allowances) 2009 DA arrears from March 2026 onwards, per the modalities detailed in the notifications issued by our finance department," CM Mamata Banerjee posted on X on Sunday, less than an hour before the CEC's presser to declare the poll schedule for four states, including Bengal.

In Feb, Supreme Court directed the Trinamool govt to pay 25% of DA arrears – amounting to Rs 10,000 crore – by March 31. The remaining arrears are to be paid based on a schedule drawn up by a committee headed by Justice (retd) Indu Malhotra.

Trinamool spokesperson Kunal Ghosh said the timing had nothing to do with elections. "The chief minister had planned this scheme well in advance and made the formal announcement when she deemed it appropriate," Ghosh said.

Bengal's leader of the opposition Suvendu Adhikari dismissed the DA announcement as "a joke" and a "classic TMC election drama.".

Joint fight by AIADMK & BJP; Stalin hopes to pull off an encore in TN

▸ Continued from page 1

The bipolarity has diminished the Left — the hegemon before Mamata's ascendance — and Congress, shrinking their capacity to benefit from any discontent against the two-term incumbent. In any case, they are hamstrung because of both ideology and the social cast of their constituencies, to make an issue of possible unease over TMC's politics of "appeasement" and "infiltration" — chief planks in BJP's quiver that have acquired a sharper edge because of the Special Intensive Revision of electoral rolls undertaken by EC.

The drive for weeding out "ineligible voters" — a category that includes those who cannot prove their citizenship — have been perceived to be directed at "illegal infiltrators".

In TN, Stalin hopes to pull off an encore. Though doing so will be an achievement that eluded his father, Stalin hopes to capitalise on the brand-recognition advantage that he may have over AIADMK leader E Palaniswami, who is leading the NDA with BJP and PMK as junior partners. Stalin also seems to be laying store by his anti-North/Hindi/Sanatani plank and the feeling of Dravidian exceptionalism that he and others, including his son Udhayanidhi, have stoked while dubbing the NDA challenge as inimical to TN.

Bypolls for 8 assembly seats on April 9 & 23

Bypolls for eight assembly seats — two each in Maharashtra and Karnataka, and one each in Goa, Gujarat, Nagaland and Tripura — will be held on April 9 and April 23, EC said on Sunday. Counting of votes for all eight constituencies will be held on May 4.

But the challenge this time seems tougher. For one, he lacks the advantage of being the challenger. Second, AIADMK and BJP are contesting together. BJP remains a minor player, but one which, thanks to Modi's appeal, has acquired pockets of support and could take its vote share to double digits in the polls without the support of any of the Dravidian players.

DANCE of DEMOCRACY

THE TIMES OF INDIA, BENGALURU
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Illustrations: **Uday Deb**

In SIR-charged Bengal, old rivals, new contest

With a war in West Asia making gas scarce, and a rushed SIR knocking many voters off the poll list, elections will follow a different script this time

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Bengal elections, post-2011, have always been keenly fought though the result may not have reflected that. But the factors at play this season make the 2026 edition very different from the 2016 and the 2021 polls, again irrespective of the end-of-the-match score.

The contest may be happening on the same ground (the same 294 seats) but the playing conditions this time are without any precedence. A combination of three factors — SIR, a war whose epicentre (Tehran) is 3,700km away from Kolkata and an 11th-hour change in Raj Bhavan — makes for a riveting contest that pundits are having a hard time decoding.

The Trinamool won a super majority in 2021, two cycles after it ousted a Left Front regime entrenched in office for 34 years. The BJP this time is doing everything it can to repeat what the Trinamool did 15 years ago but may have been blindsided by something that no one saw coming: the rise in price of LPG, from the one that makes autorickshaws run to the one that makes kitchen fires burn.

The single biggest change in playing conditions this time, however, has been effected by the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) in electoral rolls.

The process may help the BJP in some seats in Kolkata and its periphery (by knocking out more Trinamool-aligned sections). But it may also work against the BJP in constituencies close to the India-Bangladesh border in North 24 Parganas and Nadia (by knocking out Matuas and Rajbangshis disproportionately).

Trinamool supremo Mamata Banerjee realised the potential danger, vociferously opposing the timing of the exercise — and its unachievable two-month schedule — from day one. And she has had her moments of triumph. The exercise has missed its own deadline and, in every neighbourhood, there are families scarred by SIR and its ever-evolving demands. Her appearance in the Supreme Court (as the "people's petitioner") showed voters that she had lost none of her fight-till-the-end instincts, even though the arena had shifted from Kolkata streets to a New Delhi courtroom.

SIR may leave a trail of questions that only the score at the end of the match can answer. But, even as the Trinamool and the BJP have been sparring over SIR, there has come another change in playing conditions: Donald Trump's war on Iran.

Like in the rest of India, queues have lengthened in Bengal, from fuel stations to domestic LPG cylinder distribution centres. Most other states, however, are not going to the polling booth in a few weeks. And it is in these long queues of angry voters that Banerjee — whose instincts for zeroing in on a political kill are without any match in Bengal — seems to have found an opportunity to neutralise the other playing conditions that may be tailor-made for the BJP.

WEST BENGAL VOTES ON APRIL 23 & APRIL 29

The biggest change in Bengal's poll topography has been effected by SIR, vociferously opposed by TMC chief Mamata Banerjee. BJP can hope to tap into public anger at a host of administrative negatives — the horrific rape-murder at the state-run R G Kar Medical College and Hospital, and repeated court verdicts on corruption scandals in recruitment processes

But, if the BJP has been blindsided by this war, the Trinamool's war room, too, has been thrown in some amount of disarray by something that has not happened in Bengal in recent memory: a change in governor a few days before the poll announcement. The incumbent, R N Ravi, comes with a reputation made in Tamil Nadu and — for the Trinamool's strategists — he may represent a far bigger danger than his predecessor, C V Ananda Bose, whom the Trinamool seemed to have "neutralised" to an extent.

There are, of course, other factors at play.

There has been a groundswell of support for the Trinamool after the introduction of the Yuva Sathi scheme (a monthly payout for Class 10 passouts looking for a job) and the increased allocation for Lakshmir Bhandar (a scheme for women). More than 81 lakh (more than 11% of Bengal's voters) queued up to be enrolled on the Yuva Sathi list.

And Banerjee, in yet another display of realpolitik, took two administrative decisions literally minutes before EC announced its poll schedule on Saturday: one agreed to pay out the enhanced dearness allowance for state staff as ordered by the Supreme Court; the other gave a 33% hike in the monthly payouts for both Hindu purohits and Muslim muezzins.

The BJP, too, can hope to tap into public anger at a host of administrative negatives, the biggest of them being the horrific rape and murder of a young medical intern at the state-run R G Kar Medical College and Hospital. The party has also focused on the repeated court verdicts on corruption scandals in recruitment processes in the education and municipal affairs departments even as PM Modi and Union home minister Amit Shah have railed against the Trinamool for its "Muslim-appeasement politics".

All these issues will weigh on voters. But they may have been pushed off the top-of-the-mind perch by the more recent developments: SIR and the war's impact on household budgets and quality of life. These three factors have made a five-year Test match more like a 20-week T20 game, unpredictable and interesting, in which a lopsided result may not indicate how close the match was.

FIGHTER, LIEUTENANT, AND FRIEND-TURNED-FOE

Mamata Banerjee

The three-time Bengal CM occupies a rare political space — simultaneously governing the state while embodying its most vocal opposition voice. At a time of repeated attacks on Bengali-speaking migrants, the unease surrounding EC's Special Intensive Revision (SIR) and shrinking central funds has stirred political anxieties in Bengal. Banerjee has, instinctively, again slipped into the role of a combative street fighter. The posture has helped her blunt the natural anti-incumbency, which often haunts govts after more than a decade in office.

Banerjee has taken the battle everywhere — on Bengal's streets, in New Delhi's political corridors, and even in the Supreme Court. The strategy reinforces her image as a politician who thrives in confrontation.

The road to the 2026 Bengal assembly election, however, presents a fresh test. SIR is reshaping the state's political fault lines. The exercise has unsettled demographic balances, especially in minority-dominated belts, where a large share of the nearly 60 lakh cases under judicial scrutiny belong to Muslims. Migrant workers and economically vulnerable groups — traditionally among Banerjee's strongest supporters — have also been caught in the crosshairs.

Yet the shifting landscape has opened new political opportunities. Urban Bengali bhadralok voters, once sceptical of Banerjee, now share frustrations over SIR's disruptions. Meanwhile, communities like Matuas and Rajbangshis — whose support helped elevate BJP as Bengal's principal opposition — are showing signs of unease.

Sensing the moment, Banerjee has turned the issue into a broader narrative, of Bengali identity and dignity. Backed by a formidable party organisation, and the strategic machinery of I-PAC, she could have fought the election from a distance. Instead, Banerjee has returned to the streets — where she has always been most formidable.

And for her, the stakes extend beyond Bengal; the verdict of 2026 will echo all the way to Delhi.

Abhishek Banerjee

His rise within Trinamool Congress has moved well beyond the question of political lineage. Over the past few years, he has emerged as one of the party's most influential organisers and strategists — earning the moniker "Senapati Abhishek" among party workers. It's a reflection of his growing stature as the CM's most trusted lieutenant.

At 38, Trinamool's National General Secretary has steadily consolidated his position as the party's second-in-command, while shaping its organisational and political strategy. The generational shift within the party became unmistakable when Mamata replaced veteran MP Sudip Bandyopadhyay with Abhishek as the Trinamool's LS leader six months ago. By then, however, party cadres — from MPs and MLAs to booth-level workers — had already begun informally addressing him as the party's "Senapati".

Since assuming the role of general secretary in June 2021, Abhishek has pushed the party toward a more structured, data-driven, and technologically agile framework. Party insiders say he relies heavily on digital feedback systems, analytics, and a young backroom team to track welfare delivery and district-level performance, reducing dependence on traditional organisational hierarchies.

His 60-day Nabajowar campaign, before the 2024 general elections, signalled a new-style political outreach, aimed at reconnecting the leadership with grassroots workers, while promoting accountability within the party.

His Diamond Harbour constituency has become a showcase of what colleagues call the "Diamond Harbour model", centred around initiatives such as the Sebashray programme — free health camps and social outreach.

As Trinamool prepares for this election, Abhishek is no longer merely the heir apparent. He has become the key contributor to the party's changing political playbook.

Suvendu Adhikari

Few in Bengal politics embody the arc of office and opposition as vividly as he. From being a grassroots agitator to a cabinet minister and now Bengal's leader of opposition, Adhikari's career has mirrored the shifting tides of the state's political landscape.

The Adhikari family has long dominated the political belt stretching from Kolaghat along the Rupnarayan River to Ramgarh — a stronghold they have nurtured for more than four decades. During the Left Front era, patriarch Sisir Adhikari symbolised the opposition in East Midnapore, and later became a founding member of Trinamool Congress. But it was Suvendu who translated that resistance into a formidable ground movement.

His political breakthrough came with the 2007 Nandigram anti-land acquisition movement, widely credited with reshaping Bengal's politics and paving the way for the Trinamool's rise. Soon after, Adhikari won the Kanthi Dakshin Assembly seat in 2006 and later moved to Parliament as MP from Tamluk. Under Mamata's govt, he rose to become a powerful cabinet minister and a key organiser behind the Trinamool's electoral success in regions such as Jangal Mahal and East Midnapore.

But in Dec 2020, Adhikari defected to BJP, marking the beginning of his second innings in opposition politics. His narrow victory over Mamata in the high-stakes Nandigram contest in 2021 cemented his stature as BJP's most prominent mass neta in Bengal. Adhikari's combative politics — and his ability to unify BJP's diverse factions — may prove crucial in shaping the party's electoral fortunes.

Delimitation X factor in Assam's changed poll math

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In many ways, the 2026 assembly polls in Assam would mark a turning point in the state's political trajectory, thanks to something that happened in 2023: delimitation, which has jumbled up lines of influence and marginalisation, effectively redrawing battle lines.

The first realignment of constituencies in 50 years has made everyone a little unsure of themselves, having radically transformed the political map, redrawing constituency boundaries, dismantling bastions, and re-engineering voter demographics.

This new political geography of sorts has not only altered the balance of power, but has also forced every major party to rethink battle strategy.

For parties such as the All India United Democratic Front (AIUDF) and the Congress, the changed poll topography has reduced the number of seats where they traditionally held sway, delimitation having diluted several constituencies where Bangladesh-origin immigrant Muslims voters have traditionally played a decisive part.

The influence of voters from the tribal community will also be more keenly felt, with the number of seats reserved for ST candidates having gone up from 16 to 19. Similarly, the number of seats reserved for SC candidates has also gone up marginally — from eight to nine, even though the total number remains unchanged: 126.

Chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma himself spoke about the rising influence of indigenous communities this time around. The CM, who's helmed the BJP govt since 2021 — and who's repeatedly spoken about "Muslim infiltrators from Bangladesh", many of whom have become citizens through the 1985 Assam Accord — said delimitation had made indigenous voters important in 103 seats, up from 90.

In 2021, 31 Muslim candidates had won — a fourth of the state's total seats — 15 from AIUDF and the rest from Congress. Delimitation has diluted some of this Muslim heft. The Muslim-indigenous equation becomes especially important this elections because the redrawing of constituencies has fragmented many of those seats, merging them with indigenous-majority areas. Muslim-decisive seats have shrunk to 23.

All in all, BJP — governing the state for the second consecutive term — seems to have consolidated its advantage, with its focus on identity politics, welfare schemes, and grassroots mobilisation to secure support among indigenous groups.

Govt's relentless drives to evict "encroachers" from forest and govt land — nearly all Bangladesh-origin Muslims — coupled with land pattas granted to indigenous landless families and descendants of tea garden workers brought by the British 200 years ago, has cemented Sarma's image as a no-nonsense politician, the sole protector of the indigenous Assamese people's "Jati, mati, bheti (identity, land, and homeland)", which has remained a BJP poll plank since 2016.

Apart from identity politics, BJP-led govt's pre-poll 2025-26 state budget released over Rs 5,000 crore in financial benefits for women and youth empowerment, undergraduate and graduate students, young entrepreneurs, NFSA subsidies, one-time aid to tea workers, and funds for namghars (Vaishnavite temples).

BJP has also fulfilled its 2021 promise of providing one lakh jobs — and gone beyond with an additional 60,000 appointments. The clinching factor has been the revival of the state public service commission, once mired in corruption but now cleansed and restored as a credible recruitment body.

With indigenous and tribal constituencies gaining prominence, BJP's allies — Asom Gana Parishad (AGP), Bodoland People's Front (BPF), United People's Party Liberal (UPPL) and Rabha Hasong Joutha Mancha — also seem well-positioned to expand their reach.

On the other hand, the delimitation bouncer has pushed Congress on the back foot. The party's traditional bases have been fragmented, forcing it to stitch a mega alliance of several regional parties: Assam Jatyia Parishad, All Party Hill Leaders Conference, CPM and CPI(ML). While the party remains the principal opposition, its ability to consolidate anti-incumbency sentiment looks weakened.

Further, chief minister Sarma's direct attack on APCC president Gaurav Gogoi and his British wife over alleged 'Pakistan links', armed with an SIT investigation report, is seen as electoral dynamite ahead of the polls.

Congress has been crying "political vendetta", with Gogoi dismissing it as "bogus propaganda" tied to his wife's legitimate work. But BJP is smelling blood, amplifying it via rallies to paint the opposition as being "soft on infiltration".

Without a strong regional narrative, Congress risks being overshadowed by BJP's dominance in the reconfigured constituencies.

Amid BJP's identity push, AIUDF — led by Badruddin Ajmal — faces perhaps the most severe impact. Its strongholds in Muslim-decisive areas have been diluted, leaving the party with fewer winnable seats. The once minority-based party appears to struggle to remain relevant in the new political setup, with its minority-centric strategy losing traction in constituencies now dominated by indigenous voters.

ASSAM VOTES ON APRIL 9

BJP, which has governed Assam for two consecutive terms, seems to have consolidated its advantage, with its focus on identity politics, welfare schemes, and grassroots mobilisation

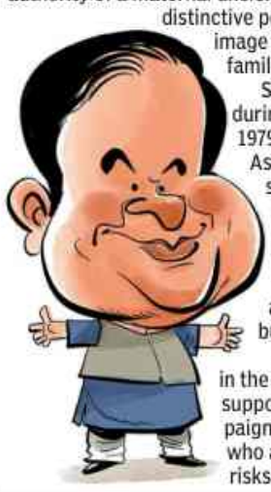
NDA'S N-E HEAVYWEIGHT VS CONG'S SUAVE CHALLENGER

Himanta Biswa Sarma

Few people in contemporary Indian politics evoke as sharply different reactions as him — admired by supporters as a decisive architect of the Northeast's political transformation, and criticised by opponents for his confrontational style. A former Congressman, who helped engineer BJP's sweeping expansion across the region a decade ago, Sarma today stands as Assam's most controversial and politically dominant figure.

Under his leadership, a state once defined by insurgency, bandhs, and economic stagnation is being recast as an emerging investment destination, with ambitions of becoming a semiconductor hub. At the same time, Sarma has waged a relentless campaign against what he describes as illegal infiltration from Bangladesh, a policy that has both energised his political base and drawn sharp criticism from detractors.

Among Assam's youth, the 57-year-old is affectionately known as "mama" — a nickname suggesting the approachable authority of a maternal uncle. The label has evolved into a distinctive political brand, reinforcing his image as a politician who combines familiarity with command.



Sarma's political journey began during the anti-foreigners movement of 1979-85, when he was active in the All Assam Students' Union. After an unsuccessful electoral debut in 1996, he has represented Jalukbari since 2001. His dramatic departure from Congress in 2015 reshaped Assam's politics, establishing him as a strategist adept at coalition-building and managing defections.

Sarma remains the central figure in the political contest — celebrated by supporters as an indefatigable campaigner, and criticised by opponents who argue that his combative rhetoric risks deepening social divides.

Gaurav Gogoi

At 43, he has emerged as the sharpest Congress voice in Assam and the party's principal challenger to Himanta Biswa Sarma. The son of three-time Assam CM Tarun Gogoi, Gaurav now carries the burden of reviving a weakened Congress and taking on the BJP's formidable political machinery.

Gogoi's stunning victory from Jorhat in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections — long considered a BJP stronghold — marked one of BJP's biggest setbacks in the state, and propelled him into the national spotlight. The win strengthened his standing within Congress, making him one of Rahul Gandhi's key political bets in Assam.

Educated as a BTech graduate from Mumbai, and later earning a Master's degree from New York University's Wagner School, Gogoi combines academic polish with political pedigree. As deputy leader of the opposition in the Lok Sabha, he has gained recognition for his articulate speeches, often taking on the govt over issues such as unemployment, federalism and democratic institutions. His measured style stands in contrast to Sarma's combative political persona.

In 2023, Gogoi was appointed president of Assam Congress, placing him at the centre of the party's revival strategy. His focus has been on rebuilding organisational networks, reconnecting with rural voters, and forging alliances with regional forces.

Yet the road ahead is challenging. Gogoi must counter BJP's strong organisational presence, while also navigating criticism of dynastic politics. His leadership — and Congress's prospects in Assam — will be severely tested.

DMK bets on Stalin power as another star enters poll arena

A second straight term for Stalin would see him go one better on his father, DMK founder M Karunanidhi. A whittled-down ADMK would be hoping for thrust from tie-up with BJP, while Vijay's TVK can pose a worry for all

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In the absence of any last-minute surprises, the assembly elections in Tamil Nadu will be a three-cornered contest featuring the DMK-led front, an NDA anchored by AIADMK, and actor Vijay's TVK. The Tamil nationalist NTK, headed by Seeman, forms a fourth group that can play spoilsport for any of the other three.

Two questions dominate the pre-poll scenario: First, can Stalin win a second consecutive term – something his father M Karunananidhi couldn't, and M G Ramachandran and J Jayalalithaa could — and, second, how many votes and seats will Vijay's party win?

TAMIL NADU VOTES ON APRIL 23

DMK, led by CM M K Stalin, enters the contest looking confident, thanks to a cohesive and comprehensive alliance, a slew of welfare schemes, and a party machinery that is strong at the grassroots. The opposition front, led by ADMK general secretary Edappadi K Palaniswami (EPS), has broadened its reach with the inclusion of the Vanniyar-friendly PMK and ADMK splinter AMMK, besides the Congress breakaway TMC, even though cohesion and campaign strength remain concerns.

TVK, which has so far not added an ally, has introduced an element of uncertainty by challenging the state's bipolar politics. Actor-turned-TVK president Vijay continues to be one of the biggest crowd pullers in the state, but there would be few who would be backing him to emerge as the winning horse.

On alliance arithmetic, DMK has the upper hand. Stalin has taken a leaf out of his father's book, stitching together an alliance of 21 parties that includes Congress, VCK (Dalit base), IUML and some other Muslim groups, CPI, CPM, MDMK, and the late actor Vijayakanth's DMDK. DMK is going to town with its welfare programmes such as the free breakfast scheme for schoolchildren and monthly financial aid for women. It also projects a stable leadership under Stalin, who has positioned himself as a defender of federalism and the state's rights.

The alliance, however, has to contend with anti-incumbency, especially on the issues of crime and corruption. Several senior DMK politicians, including sitting and former ministers, face corruption charges. The govt would be wary over its law-and-order record, with the opposition targeting Stalin over cases of murder and sexual assault. Govt has also been accused of not doing enough to curb drug peddling.

ADMK's challenges appear more complex. The party has not won any major election since the death of Jayalalithaa in Dec 2016 (the year she won a second consecutive term). EPS's first struggle was to keep the party intact, after he'd expelled several netas, including former Jayalalaithaa aide V K Sasikala, her nephew TTV Dhinakaran, and former CM O Panneerselvam (OPS). Senior ADMK leader KA Sengottaiyan recently joined TVK. OPS, after quitting NDA as an 'independent ally', left the alliance and found refuge in DMK, while Sasikala has floated her own outfit and plans to field candidates in Thevar-dominated southern districts, which spells a threat to ADMK's prospects.

While the inclusion of PMK and AMMK has improved its numerical strength, NDA doesn't measure up to the DMK-led alliance when it comes to representation of different communities. The opposition's political messaging revolves around anti-incumbency and nepotism (with Stalin's son Udhayanidhi being projected as the successor).

While PM Narendra Modi and Union home minister Amit Shah have spoken about forming an NDA govt in the state, EPS has insisted that ADMK will form a govt on its own. The two parties have yet to decide on the seat-sharing formula for the elections ahead.

DMK govt has used welfare measures, such as the opening of co-working spaces, to woo youth, seen as a major focus for actor Vijay's TVK

However, ADMK can count on its grassroots network and is also banking on its allies' regional strengths — BJP in Kanyakumari district and some western parts, PMK in northern districts, and AMMK in southern parts.

Vijay, meanwhile, remains the 'X' factor, though surveys regarding his TVK's vote-getting potential have thrown up varied estimates. The stampede at his roadshow in Karur that killed 41 people on Sept 27 last year proved a speedbreaker for TVK's campaign.

While momentum slowed down for the party, Vijay's reluctance to meet the victims' families raised questions about his ability to face up to political challenges. CBI, investigating the stampede, has been summoning the actor to Delhi, triggering speculation that BJP is using the case to pressure him to join NDA. Vijay's 'last' movie, 'Jana Nayagan', remains canned well after its scheduled release date as CBFC is yet to clear it for screening.

Third-front experiments are not new to Tamil Nadu politics. The most recent example was actor-politician Vijayakanth's DMDK, which eventually faded, leaving the state's bipolar politics intact. However, Vijay's political venture is considered different, given his massive fan base, particularly among youths across the state. There are also indications that a section of Christian voters, who earlier supported DMK, could shift towards TVK.

In the end, this election may not just decide who forms the next govt in Tamil Nadu, but also determine if the politically bipolar state will see the emergence of a third alternative.

COMMANDER, JAYA LOYALIST, AND DEBUTANT

M K Stalin

For Tamil Nadu's CM, these polls are more than just another electoral contest. It is a test of both his ability to retain office in the state and his ambition to expand his stature nationally, as a leading voice of opposition politics against BJP.

Affectionately known as "Thalapathi"— or commander — by party cadres, Stalin has positioned himself as the defender of Tamil identity and federal rights. Under his leadership, DMK heads a broad alliance of nearly 20 parties, combining a strong organisational network with a coalition that spans ideological and social groups across the state.

Stalin has built his political narrative around what he calls the "Dravidian model of governance", emphasising welfare schemes alongside economic growth. His govt has highlighted initiatives in social welfare, education and public health, while simultaneously framing its political battles with the Centre over funds and federal autonomy, as part of a larger fight for Tamil Nadu's rights. In doing so, Stalin has cast the election as a broader contest between "Tamil Nadu and Delhi".

Yet the road ahead is not without obstacles. Anti-incumbency remains a key challenge, compounded by allegations of corruption against several ministers, criticism over tax and electricity tariff hikes, and persistent charges of dynastic politics. Political rivals are also attempting to exploit emerging fault lines. ADMK leader Edappadi K Palaniswami has tapped into agrarian unrest in the Cauvery delta, while the emergence of actor Vijay's party threatens to cut into traditional DMK support among minorities and Dalits.

For Stalin, the election will be a defining moment — both for his leadership in Tamil Nadu and his role in shaping national opposition politics.

Edappadi K Palaniswami

For ADMK general secretary EPS, these polls are far more than a battle for forming govt. It is a fight for ADMK's political survival. The party has suffered a string of electoral setbacks since 2021.

In what is shaping to be a multi-cornered contest, Palaniswami stands as the principal challenger to Stalin. For the 71-year-old, this election will determine whether he can reclaim political ground and consolidate his leadership within the party.

Since taking charge of ADMK, EPS has sought to rebuild alliances, including re-establishing ties with BJP. Yet, keeping the party organisation intact has proved challenging. Several senior netas, disillusioned by repeated electoral defeats, have defected to rival parties, including DMK and actor Vijay's TVK. Alliance arithmetic has also posed difficulties. ADMK has lost partners such as DMDK and SDPI, while Muslim political groups have distanced themselves following the party's alignment with BJP. Meanwhile, DMK's welfare initiatives — particularly women-centric schemes — have made notable inroads into ADMK's once formidable women voter base.

Palaniswami is banking heavily on anti-incumbency against DMK govt, citing concerns over rising crime, narcotics cases and corruption allegations against ministers. However, the emergence of Vijay's party threatens to fragment the anti-govt vote. For EPS, the election is not merely about challenging Stalin — it is about proving that ADMK remains a force in Tamil Nadu politics.

Vijay

Tamil Nadu has long witnessed film stars crossing into politics. But since Jayalalithaa, few have managed to translate cinematic popularity into sustained political influence. Actor Vijay now seeks to rewrite that story.

Making his formal political debut in 2024, with the launch of Tamilaga Vettri Kazhagam (TVK), Vijay positioned his party as an alternative to the state's two dominant Dravidian forces. In his early political messaging, he identified DMK as his principal political adversary, while framing the BJP as his ideological opponent. This dual critique has shaped much of his campaign narrative, allowing him to question both Stalin's governance, and the broader policies of Modi-led Centre.

Vijay's entry has injected a fresh dose of unpredictability into Tamil Nadu politics. His roadshows and public meetings have drawn massive crowds, particularly among younger voters. However, his campaign suffered a setback in Sept 2025, when a stampede at a public gathering in Karur claimed 41 lives, forcing him to recalibrate his political messaging. CBI is probing the incident.

Despite the controversy, Vijay's popularity — especially among voters under 35 — remains significant. His identity and secular political positioning also broaden his appeal among minority communities, which have traditionally supported DMK. Yet, challenges persist. TVK remains a fledgling organisation with limited second-rung leadership, and it is still unclear whether Vijay's vast fan base can be converted into a disciplined political cadre.

As Tamil Nadu heads into a complex, multi-cornered contest, Vijay remains the election's true wild card — capable of reshaping vote shares, even if his party's electoral conversion into seats remains uncertain.

Why stakes are so high this time in tiny Puducherry

PM Narendra Modi with Puducherry CM N Rangasamy (centre) at a function in the Union Territory earlier this month

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Unlike in many states going to the polls this year, there are going to be no favourites in the tiny Union Territory of Puducherry, which is set to witness a tough contest between NDA — led by All India NR Congress (AINRC) — and the DMK-Congress alliance.

PUDUCHERRY VOTES ON APRIL 9

BJP, a junior NDA partner here, is trying to find a toehold in the Tamil-speaking Puducherry in order to spread to neighbouring Tamil Nadu, which remains a Dravidian fortress.

In the 30-member assembly in Puducherry, AINRC — which grew out of a Congress splinter group — has 10 MLAs, while BJP has six. For NDA, the main thrust is mainly on the popularity of chief minister N Rangasamy and BJP's 'double-engine' narrative. Rangasamy, CM since 2021, remains the central figure of Puducherry politics. NDA will have an edge if he manages to maintain his image as the 'People's CM' while leveraging BJP's central resources.

BJP's footprints in the tiny UT have grown, after some Congress and other netas joined it ahead of the 2021 polls. Prime Minister Narendra Modi and top BJP functionaries have visited Puducherry recently, showing how serious the party is in winning more seats here.

The opposition alliance grapples with internal leadership challenges that could impact its winning potential. While Congress has traditionally led the alliance in Puducherry, DMK has emerged as the principal opposition, with six seats (compared to Congress's two in the outgoing assembly). DMK is now pushing for a larger share of seats, citing its "strike rate" and the popularity of the 'Dravidian model' in Tamil Nadu.

Led by Lok Sabha MP and PPCC president V Vaithilingam and former chief minister V Narayanasamy, Congress is fighting to prove it is still the national representative, a secular force. They insist — irrespective of the number of MLAs the opposition parties have — that Congress should lead the alliance in Puducherry, as DMK does in Tamil Nadu.

Vaithilingam says it is too early to share details of seat-sharing. "We have briefed the party high command in Delhi about recent political developments. We will announce details on seat-sharing once we get direction. We are discussing seat arithmetic with local DMK netas," he adds.

Leader of opposition R Siva (from DMK) says the party wants to establish a Dravidian model govt in Puducherry. "We won seats where Congress could not in the previous elections. We plan to contest about 18 to 20 seats this time and lead the alliance," says Siva.

Political observers say the opposition's success depends on just how united they can be. "If they finalise seat-sharing without a fallout, they can capitalise on anti-incumbency regarding issues, such as law and order and the govt's failure in fulfilling its poll promises," says an academic who doesn't want to be named.

In a close contest, several emerging players could act as spoilers. Actor-politician Vijay's new party is set to make its electoral debut. Given Vijay's fan following, TVK could garner a considerable share of votes, especially from youngsters, and that could eat into both alliances' vote share. Tamil nationalist Seeman's NTK has been the first to announce candidates for 28 seats in Puducherry. NTK's slow, yet consistent, growth makes it a third force that could decide margins.

Political analysts predict NDA could retain office if it remains cohesive and runs a focused campaign. DMK's momentum in neighbouring Tamil Nadu presents the most significant threat to Rangasamy's dream of becoming chief minister for a fourth term.

Left looks to rewrite Kerala story, UDF eyes return to old plot

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The 2026 assembly election is shaping up as more than a routine joust for office in Kerala. The battle is emerging as a structural test of political endurance for the CPM-led Left Democratic Front (LDF), an existential battle for the Congress-led United Democratic Front (UDF), and a strategic expansion project for the BJP-led NDA.

KERALA VOTES ON APRIL 9

A protest led by Congress over alleged negligence in govt hospitals last month in Kerala. The poll battle will be a test of political endurance for LDF, while Congress-led UDF will seek to remain relevant in state politics

LDF: 10-Year Itch?

Under CM Pinarayi Vijayan, LDF enters the election seeking a rare, third consecutive term — something unprecedented in Kerala's modern political history. The front had already disrupted the state's four-decade-old pattern of alternating govts by forming govt in 2021. A victory in 2026 would cement that shift from cyclical anti-incumbency to performance-based continuity.

LDF's campaign is expected to foreground infrastructure expansion, welfare delivery and state-led development. Road connectivity upgrades, digital governance initiatives and sustained social security pension schemes form the backbone of its narrative. The govt is likely to argue that stability has enabled long-term planning and implementation, striking a contrast with what it calls the opposition's fragmented leadership.

Yet, a decade in office inevitably produces fatigue. Concerns over fiscal stress, unemployment, rising living costs and allegations of administrative centralisation have created pockets of discontent. Anti-incumbency in Kerala does not always erupt as a wave, but accumulates silently across demographic segments.

For the CPM, the anchor of the LDF, the strength lies in its disciplined cadre network and booth-level organisational machinery. However, the party's challenge in 2026 is not merely organisational — it is sociological. The possibility of minority consolidation against the Left has become a serious electoral variable.

The govt's decision to extend a Rs 1,600 monthly pension to Catholic nuns and other women in religious institutions without independent income reflects a calibrated outreach to Christian communities. Such measures indicate that identity balancing, once peripheral to Left politics, is now central to its electoral calculus.

UDF: Moment of Reckoning?

For the Congress-led UDF, the 2026 election is being widely viewed as a defining moment. After two consecutive defeats, the alliance cannot consider the prospect of another term in opposition as that will certainly pose a risk of structural erosion. Under Opposition Leader V D Satheesan, Congress has adopted a sharper and more confrontational tone against the govt.

Corruption allegations, governance failures and economic distress form the core of its campaign strategy. UDF is betting on accumulated anti-incumbency, hoping that, channelled effectively, it can offset LDF's welfare-driven appeal. UDF's emphatic performance in local body elections would have come as a shot of vigour for its leadership and rank and file.

UDF's alliance arithmetic hinges significantly on minority consolidation — particularly among Christian and Muslim voters — alongside the recovery of urban middle-class support. Allies such as the Indian Union Muslim League and Kerala Congress factions remain critical to this coalition matrix. Smooth seat-sharing arrangements and credible candidate selection will determine whether dissatisfaction with the ruling dispensation translates into votes for the main opposition.

However, Congress continues to wrestle with factional undercurrents. UDF's ability to present a cohesive leadership alternative will be as important as its ability to amplify discontent with the governing front.

BJP: Margins To Mainstream?

Though the Kerala polity remains largely bipolar — split between LDF and UDF — BJP sees 2026 as an opportunity to entrench itself as a credible, and durable, third pole. The party has steadily increased its vote share in recent elections, particularly in urban constituencies and pockets with potential of strong Hindu consolidation.

BJP's strategy combines identity mobilisation with aspirational politics, leveraging the appeal of its national leadership — led by PM Narendra Modi — and doubling down on youth outreach. While it may not yet be in a position to form govt, even incremental seat gains could alter constituency-level margins and complicate the bipolar arithmetic.

In closely fought contests, a strengthened BJP presence could fragment traditional vote banks, especially in areas where the margin of victory between LDF and UDF has historically been thin. Thus, the party's impact may be disproportionate to its seat tally.

Beyond Alternation

The upcoming assembly elections are, therefore, not simply about who forms the next govt in the state. It represents a deeper transition in Kerala's political arena.

For LDF, it is about redefining politics of Kerala — from a state of predictable alternation to one of sustained incumbency. For UDF, it is about proving that anti-incumbency remains a decisive force, while BJP will be looking to convert ideological presence into legislative relevance.

Governance, welfare sustainability, economic stress and identity politics are likely to intersect in complex ways. The electorate's verdict will indicate whether Kerala prefers continuity, correction, or structural reconfiguration of its political landscape. In many ways, 2026 may determine not just the next govt, but the future shape of Kerala's party system itself.

TACTICIAN, FIREBRAND, AND TECHNOCRAT

Pinarayi Vijayan

At 81, the Kerala CM remains the most powerful figure within both CPM and state govt. Known for his carefully cultivated tough-man persona, Vijayan has long projected the image of a decisive administrator who thrives in political combat. In his younger days, this admirer of Rajinikanth's action films often had physical confrontations with political adversaries — stories that reinforce his reputation as a hardened political fighter.

Under Vijayan's leadership, LDF made history in 2021 by returning to form govt — an achievement that broke Kerala's long-standing pattern of alternating govts. Hailing from Kannur, often described as the "red citadel", Vijayan rose rapidly through CPM ranks in the 1980s. His early ascent was aided by veteran Communist V S Achuthanandan, though the two later became bitter rivals in a prolonged ideological and political clash.

Often described as media-averse, Vijayan prefers carefully scripted speeches and structured press briefings. While not known for flamboyant oratory, he compensates with a commanding authority within the party and govt.

Seen by supporters as a pragmatic "doer" focused on development and welfare, Vijayan has also faced controversies, including the long-running SNC Lavalin case — an episode that continues to shadow an otherwise formidable political career.

V D Satheesan

As Kerala moves toward another fiercely contested electoral cycle, Congress-led opposition's political spotlight increasingly rests on him. Satheesan is the leader of opposition and the party's most combative voice against the governing LDF.

A lawyer by training, Satheesan began his political journey through Congress's youth and organisational ranks before entering the assembly in 2001.

Over two decades, he has built a reputation as one of the state's most articulate legislators. His speeches address issues ranging from public finance and governance to environmental policy and institutional accountability.

Since taking charge as LoP, Satheesan has positioned himself as the LDF govt's most persistent critic.

Satheesan has also focused on strengthening Congress's grassroots network while attempting to manage long-standing factional rivalries within the party. He now faces his most critical test: transforming the opposition's combative politics into a cohesive electoral challenge against the entrenched Left govt.

Rajeev Chandrasekhar

As the BJP's face in Kerala, he has taken on the formidable task of positioning the party as a credible alternative to the state's entrenched bipolar contest between LDF and UDF.

Chandrasekhar's immediate challenge extends beyond winning his own electoral battle in the Nemom constituency. BJP leadership expects him to translate NDA's improved performance in the recent Lok Sabha elections — where the party finished second in several constituencies — into a stronger showing in the assembly polls.

Chandrasekhar's early political career unfolded largely outside the state. Within BJP, he has served as a national spokesperson and a prominent strategist for Kerala.

Having run a close contest against Congress's Shashi Tharoor in Thiruvananthapuram, Chandrasekhar has earned respect within the party for his organisational drive. BJP hopes this will strengthen its push to expand its footprint in Kerala.

— Illustrations: **Uday Deb**

CONTRAPUNTO

The people who cast the votes don't decide an election, the people who count the votes do

– STALIN, per memoirs of his ex-secy Boris Bazhanov

Indian Poll League

EC's made the voting schedule tight this time, can parties be tight-fisted with freebies?

Dates are out for 2026's Indian Poll League. Four large states and a UT will vote between April 9-29, and results will be out on May 4. This round will be especially interesting because it's the first after SIR. So, usual assumptions about vote shares, etc, do not apply. Regardless, there will be punditry. Can Congress reclaim Assam, can BJP wrest Bengal? Reams will be written on these, and the state of play in Tamil Nadu and Kerala also. And going by data, anything's possible. In 2024 LS polls, Congress and BJP were neck-and-neck in Assam, in terms of vote share. BJP had closed the gap with Trinamool in Bengal. Tamil Nadu seems unlikely to turn, but BJP will be looking to grow there. Also in Kerala, where the fight is between LDF and Congress-led UDF.

In three of the four states, these polls are a test of incumbency. Assam and Kerala have had the same party/grouping in office for 10 years – while Mamata in Bengal is finishing 15. Even if voter fatigue isn't a factor, incumbents aren't taking chances. That means more displays of prodigality. Hours before EC's presser, Bengal govt hiked honorarium for purohits and muezzins. More promises of unconditional cash transfers will follow as manifestos are rolled out. Such transfers are likely to cost India ₹1.7L cr this fiscal. RBI and Economic Survey have flagged "fiscal populism" as a risk for state finances, and even India's sovereign borrowing costs, but who's listening?

In terms of stakes, BJP has least to lose in this round as it governs only one of four poll-bound states. But it will be fighting zealously to expand. Pressure is on Congress, though, as it has solo govts in only three states now. Iran war and the resultant gas crisis have added a new variable to these contests. If shortages persist through March, voters will blame somebody. Although the political cost can't be estimated beforehand. But since oil marketing firms are absorbing the higher cost of crude, BJP's shielded on that side. Another unknown that EC must watch out for is political violence. It's good that Bengal will poll in just two phases this time, down from six each in 2011 and 2016, eight in 2021, and seven in 2024 LS polls. While that signals confidence in security arrangements, there shouldn't be a repeat of last time's post-poll violence in Bengal, and elsewhere. Voters deserve a safe and fair poll season.

Dissent & Democracy

Wangchuk's release highlights the key problem of arbitrary use of harsh laws

GOI dropping the most serious allegation, against climate and statehood activist Sonam Wangchuk, raises even more questions for authorities, than his detention did six months ago. From time he was picked up, last Sept, and lodged in Jodhpur jail, it was clear the draconian National Security Act had been invoked without much thought. Wangchuk was accused of inciting a Gen Z protest in Ladakh, supposedly along the lines of Bangladesh and Nepal, and even Arab Spring was referenced. His actions were termed "prejudicial to the security of the state". He was on his fifth protest fast (Delhi Chalo Padyatra) for statehood, and inclusion of Ladakh in Sixth Schedule. Yet, instead of letting a peaceful protest carry on, authorities jailed him for six months – half the maximum period of detention without charges, allowed under NSA. And linked him to the deaths of protesters, on Sept 24, in police action.

Wangchuk's release comes after govt concluded that "Ladakh's problems" must be resolved through "engagement and dialogue". Are we to conclude that fundamental freedoms are vulnerable to this extent to a govt's shifting frameworks for governance? Surely not. Of course, it is welcome that govt finally recognises that crackdowns and heavy-handed responses foment trouble, while peaceful protests form the beating heart of a healthy democracy. Dialogue is everything.

But the real question remains: how fickle are fundamental freedoms? It is good that govt realised jailing Wangchuk hurt its own cause for peace in the new UT. Crackdowns on protests, arrests, and routine invocation of toughest laws, have long been knee-jerk reactive policing of Indian cops, blessed by their political masters. Dialogue *after* detention is really an admission of excess. And it is a fact that a law like NSA, which must be used judiciously and sparingly, loses its legitimacy, when it is used to police dissent.

Fortune's vine

A money plant parent has his ups and downs

Jairam N Menon

Of all the get-rich-quick schemes sprouting around the land, money plant has the best PR. *Epipremnum aureum* is an honourable plant. It doesn't trap you like a Ponzi scheme, or hound you to tears on social media, and it never gets crass with details of how much you will make, and how long will it take. Yet, everyone says it delivers results.

If you walk to the neighbourhood nursery, and buy a potted specimen, you will be adding to your green quotient, but will make little progress towards becoming rich and successful. For best results, experts tell us, you need to snitch. I snitched as advised, and 'borrowed' a cutting from Dr Vaidyanath next door. And no, it's not a crime. Helping yourself to a sprig is not just socially acceptable, it's encouraged as a gesture of communal goodwill.

Since the plant is fast-growing, early signs of new life become visible in a couple of weeks. But that was an anxious fortnight I spent plant parenting. I kept asking myself if the light was bright, and the water right. I also had to walk a tightrope. Showing undue interest in the green shoots, would put pressure on the tender things. On the other hand, pretending to be indifferent, may make the fledgling feel unwanted. Would talking to it help, as the gardening gurus advise? Or should I go overboard, and burst into a stirring anthem? My friends vetoed the last option – money plants, they said, have feelings.

Well, all that was months ago. The plant has since awakened its inner Amazon rainforest and taken off in all directions. It scaled walls, sought sanctuary on windowsills, and ran along balcony railings, to begin a dalliance with my neighbour's chrysanthemums and dahlia. In a display of inclusivity that HR would have approved, it even embraced his drainpipe. Unfortunately, I have not seen similar action in my bank account, occasioning some doubt about when my game plan would see results.

Meanwhile, Dr Vaidyanath's son, an avid vlogger, has been looking appreciatively at my glossy, green track record. This morning, he asked me to consider a series of podcasts on terrace gardening, titled 'Taking Horticulture to the Next Level'. He said I could become a star in the indoor gardening circuit. Perhaps the money plant is doing its job, after all.

States And The Nation

If oppn parties win in Bengal, TN, Kerala, national politics will be likely less anarchic

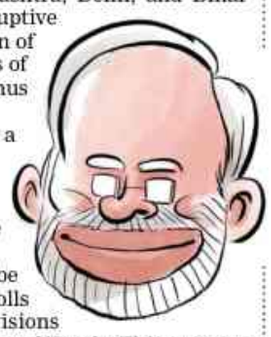
R Jagannathan

From a purely strategic viewpoint, it should make little difference to BJP whether the party wins or loses, in the four states and one UT, going to polls in April. Barring perhaps Assam, which it would be loath to lose, as its most important beachhead in Northeast. But it can lose in Tamil Nadu, West Bengal, Kerala, and Puducherry, and yet remain content – with a mere increase in vote share.

Political mavens will be focused on a different, specific set of questions. Will SIR of electoral rolls impact Bengal results in any way, especially in constituencies where deletions were larger than usual? Will Vijay hurt the DMK or ADMK fronts? How will Kerala results be impacted by BJP's rise, and anti-incumbency against LDF after two terms in office? In Assam, will Himanta's aggressive rhetoric and actions against "Miya" Muslims deliver votes, from his own core constituency of Assamese and Bengali Hindus?

From the POV of national stability, if regional parties and Congress manage to retain their strongholds, they may be less inclined to encourage street-level confrontations and anarchy. A healthy democracy needs many parties to believe that they have a decent shot at office, if they do the right things.

Unfortunately, after a brief return to optimism post 2024 Lok Sabha elections, consistent and decisive defeats in Haryana, Maharashtra, Delhi, and Bihar assembly elections have made opposition prone to disruptive actions. We have not had one really productive session of Parliament for months on end. Most important pieces of legislation are being passed amidst dins and walkouts, thus posing moral questions over their legitimacy.



In fact, it looks unlikely that anything will pass in a bipartisan way in 18th Lok Sabha, whose term ends in June 2029. Just in the ongoing session, Congress, aided by other opposition parties, has brought a no-confidence motion against Speaker, and TMC has initiated a move to impeach Chief Election Commissioner.

A key point of contention is SIR. But it cannot be anybody's case that periodic cleansing of the electoral rolls is unnecessary, in a healthy democracy. Plus, these revisions did not cause any major problems in Bihar, Tamil Nadu, and Kerala. This suggests that the issue is largely a Trinamool preoccupation, possibly because the probability of non-citizens getting into the voters' list is greatest in this porous border state.

EC can be faulted for not holding detailed dialogues with political parties, but that cannot be a reason for Mamata Banerjee to take the matter to the streets repeatedly and intimidate EC officials. EC, which does not have permanent staff on its own, has to depend on state officials to do its work, and here Banerjee must be held accountable for the disruptions. That Supreme Court is now using judicial officers, to hear appeals against the potential exclusions in the Bengal voter list, is a verdict against not just TMC, but also EC, which could have done more to sell the SIR idea to political parties.

The real import of these elections will not lie in their outcomes, but in setting the political stage for more contentious issues, which the polity will face in 2027 and beyond. In the first half of 2027, elections are due in the all-important state of UP. Losses here, and in Maharashtra, led to BJP losing its parliamentary majority in 2024. Uttarakhand, Goa, Punjab, and Manipur are also due in the first half, followed by Himachal and Gujarat towards the end of the year.

2027 is also the year in which we will get early glimpses of Census numbers, and thus delimitation. The actual reallocation of Lok Sabha seats is something that will need to be negotiated with southern regional parties. Decisions on implementing the women's quota, and also whether the overall numbers of Lok Sabha MPs must be raised to accommodate the additional number of women MPs, will also need a political consensus.

The political temperature of 2027 will be set by what happens in 2026, where BJP may not have much to lose, but still has the ability to send a message, on whether or not to expect reasonable bipartisanship in national issues.

POLLS 2026 Bengal, TN, Assam, Kerala

The Young Women Vote

Median voter in all states, they are aspirational. And the swing factor keeping parties guessing

Uday Chandra

With the election schedule announced, attention now turns to the median voter, who will shape the Bengal, Assam, Kerala, and Tamil Nadu outcomes. This median voter is young, female, and aspires to a secure middle-class life. She is also open to joining shifting social coalitions, cutting across caste and religious divides.

In most states, women now vote at rates comparable to, or higher than, men. Studies find that female voters across India respond more to institutionalised welfare delivery, than ideological rhetoric. Incumbents now offer material benefits to households (subsidised food, cooking fuel, housing, income and health support), bypassing older patronage structures and ideological frames, to reach women across caste and creed.

In Tamil Nadu, successive Dravidian govts have invested in women-centric welfare schemes, from marriage assistance to free bus travel. Communist Kerala, too, has welfare initiatives such as Kudumbashree, plus healthcare and pension schemes for women. In West Bengal, TMC invests in Lokkhir Bhandaar (monthly cash transfers), Kanyashree (girls' education), and Rupashree (marriage stipends), to forge direct relationships between women voters and the country's only female CM. Similar initiatives exist in Assam.

Women-centric welfare, especially direct cash transfers, undoubtedly favours political incumbents. Yet, state govts cannot presume electoral loyalty. Opposition parties in these states, too, recognise women as a competitive electoral constituency, and propose expansive welfare arrangements. Competitive welfarism shifts electoral politics away from (male) political brokers, who stitch together caste or religious coalitions. Women across castes and religions may vote similarly, even as they depart from men in their households.

This is an important shift in Indian politics. Accountability via universal welfare delivery, not empty promises of identity-based sloganeering, is the new game in town. Women are key swing voters who keep parties and pundits guessing.

Young aspirational voters matter a lot. But their concerns differ across poll-bound states. Inside West Bengal and Kerala, educated youth lack high-quality jobs. Out-migration is common. Incumbents emphasise state-directed development, while opposition promises private investment and job creation. Assam, too, faces similar challenges. Its govt offers regional infra and connectivity to the Indian mainland, and Southeast Asia, while opposition focuses on unemployment, inequality, and a composite regional identity. Lastly, Tamil Nadu's ecosystem of engineering colleges and industrial corridors, allows governing DMK to combine a twin focus on economic growth and social justice. This pushes opposition politics to focus on governance efficiency and national integration.

Across poll-bound states, young voters evaluate govts less through ideological narratives, than through perceived performance. Education and job opportunities matter disproportionately, for those seeking to climb the socioeconomic ladder. Economic growth matters less to the median voter than distribution of prosperity. It is not that *jaati* and *dharm* have lost their appeal, but we are in a hybrid political system in which old caste blocs have fragmented, civilisational cohesion remains elusive, and a new welfarism cuts across vote banks. Social identities continue to be salient for aspirational youth, but aspirations are reframed, with a new emphasis on governance performance.

Minority citizens in these poll-bound states exceed those in the rest of India. From an eighth in Tamil Nadu to two-fifths or higher in Assam and Kerala, religious minorities matter electorally in these states in ways unfamiliar to northerners. Muslims and Christians in these states are diverse. Assamese- and Bengali-speaking Muslims in Assam, for instance, overlap, yet remain distinct in their voting behaviour.

Minority youth also vote differently from their parents and grandparents, favouring economic opportunities over empty slogans. Minority concerns may thus be folded into a wider phenomenon of youth and gender politics, rooted in aspirations and effective governance.

In sum, young, female, and aspirational voters are likely to swing the upcoming elections in favour of those perceived to be doing more for their households and futures. Parties that speak to the concerns of these median voters are likely to build broad electoral coalitions, in an era of democratic flux.

Illustrations: Uday Deb

In 4 States, These 5 Key Factors Aren't Making Headlines

Nandita.Sengupta @timesofindia.com

● First, governing parties of three states (TMC, DMK, CPM) back impeachment of Chief Election Commissioner, under whose guidance, state election commissions will conduct assembly polls. This will frame campaigning.

● Second, Muslim votes. Same old? Not quite. Muslim votes in Assam, Bengal and Kerala, all three have high proportions of Muslims in state population. Muslim blocs are, mostly, lined up behind TMC in Bengal, UDF in Kerala, and opposition parties in Assam, including Owaisi's AIMIM, and Ajmal's AIUDF.

It's for Pinarayi to block Kerala BJP's inroads into LDF's 'Hindu' base – UCs/Ezhava vote. BJP winning Thiruvananthapuram corporation polls, weeks before assembly elections, triggered insta-speak of a "definite shift" in Kerala's politics.

As for Bengal, oh, what a web we weave…Bengali Muslim "infiltrator" from Bangladesh is in focus. Logical way of ensuring electoral rolls are spick 'n span would be to allow the exercise time. Instead, judicial officers from other states have been hauled in to decide on "logical discrepancies".

Census officials were, last week, tasked, spitspot, to decide on CAA applications – a sudden deluge from Matuas, a namasudra (read Dalit) Bangladesh-origin community, whom SIR documentation trumped. This, when Census houselisting kicks off in April. That's a lot of work for a handful of men and women.

Bengal will have not just final rolls, but a final final, with SC allowing supplementary lists, once logical discrepancies and citizenship issues, of undocumented refugee-origin people, are settled. That's very unusual.

● Third, the play for women's vote is more complicated – about 30L women (*https://tinyurl.com/yt76yrfm*) are no longer eligible. As of now. TMC's challenge in Bengal is to retain Mamata's strength: women, across castes. BJP has marched on, taking to mission mode, self-help groups – a UPA-era central scheme mechanism, and lately BJP's mainstay in several states.

POLLS 2026 Bengal, TN, Assam, Kerala

Per LS response (*https://tinyurl.com/ykre543z*), last year, Bengal had 11.9L SHGs, second only to Bihar, under the central scheme mandating at least one rural woman per household in SHG activity, and had mobilised 1.2cr households in Bengal, country's highest. Alongside its 'sindoor' plank, and protection talk, Bengali women are BJP's focus.

● Fourth, women, Muslims, SIR – TN's poll politics goes around all of these. Stalin, instead, is rallying together all TN political parties over delimitation. Unique, that a state-level election should centre stage national politics.

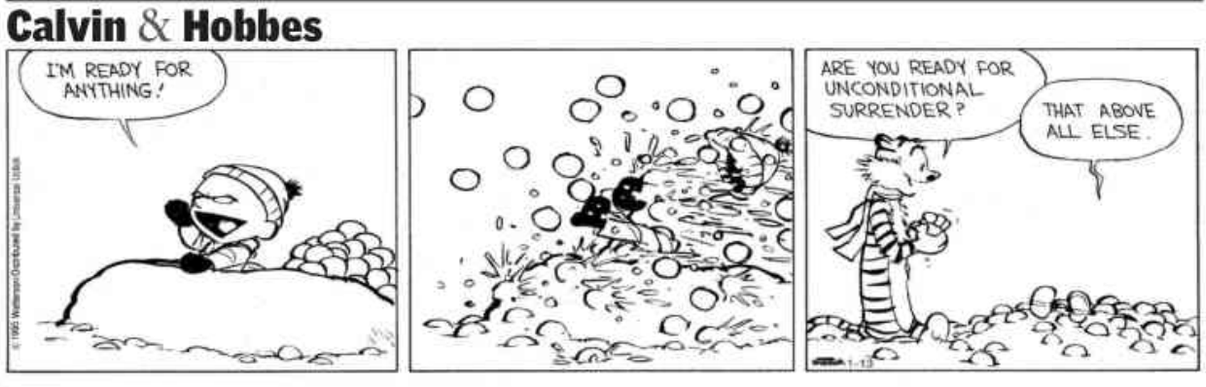
Centre-state relations. As Stalin leads the southern charge, he is also moving into spaces Left has ceded. Evident in the seat-share wrangles between DMK and Left, and Stalin's new statue for Marx.

A West Asia at war, means political mini-missiles darting hither and thither in Kerala – who is backing whom, who's appeasing, who's rescuing Indians from the Gulf. Here, global hurts the local.

● Fifth, this'll also be Assam's first election after delimitation, which retained the number of constituencies, and reduced the number of seats with significant Muslim population to 25, from 35. Some of these are now SC/ST seats. This makes it a challenge for Muslim Dalits to contest. Because, the issue is grey, a legal-political wrangle – can Dalits who're Muslim or Christian claim SC status? Meanwhile, some Assamese Muslim groups are now tagged ST. CM Sarma has to show he can return to office with a majority – BJP won 60 in 2021, less than halfway mark to the 126-seat legislature.

Govt, via CAA, welcomes Bangladeshi Hindu immigrants. Yet, in Assam, only one such applicant has now become an Indian citizen – of over 5L Bengali Hindus left out of NRC. Ground reality is it's still NRC, results of which BJP contests, that's the political tinderbox. The project to replace the language/sub-nationalism divide with religious/hyper-nationalist politics remains, as yet, incomplete.

Calvin & Hobbes



Sacred*space*

In dwelling,
live close to
the ground.
In thinking, keep
to the simple.
In conflict, be fair
and generous.
In governing, don't try to control.
In work, do what you enjoy.
In family life, be completely present.

Lao Tzu

Lasting Peace Begins With Calm Minds

The XIV Dalai Lama

Compassion lies at the heart of the spiritual path. It is not a luxury, or something reserved for saints – it is the very essence of our humanity. Without compassion, peace within remains out of reach, and without inner peace, peace in the world cannot take root. Compassion is not just a feeling. It is a deep and enduring concern for the suffering of others, paired with a wish to relieve it. Unlike pity, which looks down on others. Compassion arises from recognising our shared experience. Others, like us, wish to be happy and free from pain. This simple truth forms the basis of a compassionate life.

From the moment we are born, we rely on care. As infants, we survive only through kindness and protection. These early experiences leave a deep imprint. Even as adults, we seek love and connection. This tells us that compassion is not foreign to us; it is part of our nature. But like a seed, it must be nurtured through intention and awareness.

Compassion is sometimes confused with attachment or emotional dependence. But true compassion is not biased or limited. It is not just for our family or friends, but for all beings, even those who oppose or harm us. When compassion extends beyond preference, it becomes a source of great strength. It allows us to meet even difficult people with understanding rather than hostility.

Compassion alone is not enough. It must be guided by wisdom. Without understanding, our efforts may be misplaced. Wisdom allows us to see the roots of suffering and respond effectively. In Buddhism, compassion and wisdom are inseparable. Wisdom sees the emptiness of fixed identity; compassion responds to suffering with care. Together, they form a force for transformation.

THE SPEAKING TREE

Compassion begins with ourselves. Many people are unkind to themselves, thinking this will make them stronger. But harshness blocks growth. By learning to treat ourselves with patience and acceptance, we become better able to care for others. A useful method is loving-kindness meditation. Begin by wishing happiness to someone close, then expand this wish to neutral people, to those you find difficult, and finally to all beings: May they be happy. May they be free from suffering. Another practice is tonglen – giving and taking. Breathe in the suffering of others and breathe out healing. This helps reduce self-centred habits and open the heart.

Meditation is helpful, but compassion must also be lived. It is expressed through kind speech, patience, and small everyday acts. Sometimes it means saying no or setting boundaries, but always with care, not anger. Compassion also means taking action to protect the vulnerable, care for the environment, and serve others without seeking reward.

Obstacles to compassion include anger, fear, pride, and especially indifference. In today's world, we are flooded with suffering and bad news. It is easy to become numb. But compassion does not require solving every problem. Sometimes it is enough to stay open, to care sincerely, and to not turn away.

In a world of conflict and division, compassion offers a different way. Lasting peace does not come only from laws or govts. It begins with individuals who develop calm minds and kind hearts. This is why i often say: If you want others to be happy, practise compassion. If you want to be happy, practise compassion.

As told to Rajiv Mehrotra

TIMES BUSINESS

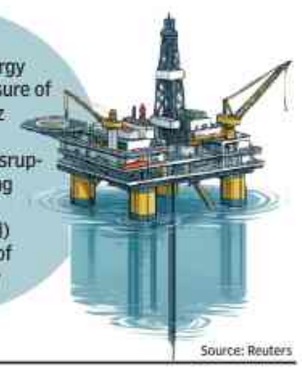
THE TIMES OF INDIA, BENGALURU | MONDAY, MARCH 16, 2026

When Oil Stops Flowing, THE WORLD SHAKES

When oil supply suddenly drops, the effects ripple across the global economy — from petrol pumps to inflation and airline fares

Four oil shocks that rocked markets in the past

International Energy Agency says the closure of the Strait of Hormuz has triggered the biggest oil supply disruption in history, cutting about 8 million barrels per day (bpd) — roughly 8% of global supply



Source: Reuters

Some Mega IPOs Face Delay | Costs Spiral For Exporters

Companies hit pause on IPO button amid raging conflict

Choose To Play Safe As Choppy Markets Take Toll On Sentiment

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Mumbai: India's choc-a-block equity-raise calendar is shifting gears, with many companies pushing back fundraises amid West Asia-driven market volatility. Deals remain on hold, not off.

"The immediate impact is that investors are less willing to add risk through new deals in the near term. This isn't so much a pricing issue but a case of biding time to see how far these events go, and to assess their overall structural and economic impact in both the near and long term," said UBS India ECM head Abhishek Joshi.

Uniqus Consultech's partner Raghuram K said companies are adopting a "wait-and-watch approach until the ongoing crisis stabilises," after which they are likely to proceed with IPOs. India has raised about $5 billion through equity issuances so far in 2026, down from $6 billion in Q1 2025, according to LSEG. IPOs accounted for $1.7 billion of that tally, compared with $2.3 billion a year earlier.

"The IPO momentum has tapered off in 2026 due to market conditions, weak post-listing performance—of 100+ IPOs in the past year, 30% delivered negative listing-day returns and 65% now trade below issue price—and the West Asian conflict, reflected in sharply lower IPO subscriptions, with median demand at 3x versus 28x in April–Dec 2025," said Ambit ECM head Vikas Khattar.

He added that "with market volatility remaining elevated, the fundraising environment has turned more cautious, particularly for companies planning near-term IPO launches."

Bankers insist the pause is tactical rather than structural. "Markets operate in windows and while recent events may have temporarily put a pause on IPO activity, fundamentally not much has changed in terms of investors' belief in the growth and strength of the Indian economy," Joshi said. Raghuram echoed the sentiment. "India's structural growth story remains strong. With year-end earnings awaited, companies are likely to prefer a more stable market environment to discover the right valuation," he said.

Equirus Capital investment banking head Bhavesh Shah said, "Given the strong domestic liquidity, rising retail participation, and sustained economic growth, any short-term delays are unlikely to materially impact full-year IPO activity."

Nor is India alone. Geopolitical tensions are injecting volatility into equity markets globally as investors assess the economic fallout of unfolding developments. Among emerging nations, India is now the second hottest IPO destination after the Czech Republic, which raised $4 billion through listings in Q1 2026. In Q1 2025, India held the top spot, according to LSEG.

Khattar said investor preferences are also shifting. "With rising geopolitical uncertainty, investors are prioritising stronger near-term earnings visibility and more conservative valuation multiples," he said, adding that companies are also "optimising" IPO sizes. Some of the companies listed this month, like Clean Max Enviro Energy Solutions, Omnitech Engineering, and PNGS Reva Diamond Jewellery, had reduced their IPO sizes.

The year has seen 20 listings so far, according to LSEG, with a few more expected in March.

For now, bankers are advising companies to stay ready so they can move quickly when the market window reopens. "Our advice is to stay prepared and be ready on the sidelines to tap the right window when it arrives," Joshi said.

Over 200 companies have filed draft prospectuses with the markets regulator, with several awaiting listing.

BIG GUNS PUTTING TOGETHER ARSENAL

- **Jio Platforms** had disclosed plans for a first-half listing; **minimum raise $4.3bn;** draft prospectus yet to be filed
- **National Stock Exchange** just hired 20 banks for IPO advisory, highest ever; **potential raise $2.5bn**
- **SBI Funds Management plans a $1.5bn IPO;** deliberations on timing and offering details
- **Flipkart in talks with investors to gauge IPO appetite;** timelines depend on market conditions; could be later this year or early 2027

VC firm Accel, Google back five AI startups

Times News Network

Bengaluru: Venture capital firm Accel and Google's AI Futures Fund have chosen five startups for the 2026 cohort of the Accel Atoms programme, offering early-stage AI founders up to $2 million in funding, cloud credits and access to Google's frontier AI models.

The startups were selected from more than 4,000 applications and will receive co-investment from Accel and the Google AI Futures Fund, along with up to $350,000 in compute credits across Google Cloud, Gemini and DeepMind infrastructure. The cohort spans sectors such as enterprise AI, voice automation, scientific research, entertainment and industrial manufacturing.

INVESTING

The selected startups include K-Dense, which is developing an AI co-scientist to assist researchers in life sciences, physics and chemistry. Dodge.ai is building autonomous AI agents for ERP management in SAP systems, while Persistence Labs is focused on voice AI tools for call centre automation. Zingroll is an AI-native platform producing AI-generated films and shows.

Accel partners Prayank Swaroop and Shekhar Kirani said the programme "backs founders at the earliest moment of possibility... This cohort represents the bold, original thinking we champion." Jonathan Silber, co-founder and director of the Google AI Futures Fund, said: "AI is moving from a novelty to a core component of industrial and scientific infrastructure."

JSW Group director Parth Jindal said the project would help the company secure long-term supplies of premium coking coal as it expands its steel-making capacity. "As we grow to 50 million tonnes of steel capacity in India by 2030, this asset will provide strategic raw material security and help cushion the company against volatile global coking coal prices," he said.

The project in a coal basin of the Tete Province in Mozambique, holds about 850 million tonnes (MT)of reserves, with an estimated 250 MT of usable coking coal. TNN

TOI IN THE CLASSROOM

Using Overnight, Liquid Funds in Volatile Markets

With geopolitical tensions in West Asia and rising volatility prompting investors to turn cautious on risk assets such as equities, financial planners say short-term debt funds, like overnight and liquid funds, are seeing renewed interest as temporary parking avenues for cash

Invesco Mutual Fund

An investor education and awareness initiative

For Know Your Customer (KYC) guidelines along with the documentary requirements and procedure for change of address, phone number, bank details, etc., please visit the Education and Guidance section on www.invescomutualfund.com. Investor should deal with only SEBI registered Mutual Funds, details of which can be verified under "Intermediaries/Market Infrastructure Institutions" on https://www.sebi.gov.in/index.html. For any grievance / complaint, please call us on 1800-209-0007 or write to us at mfservices@invescoindia.com. Alternatively, complaints can be registered on the SEBI SCORES Portal at https://scores.sebi.gov.in

Mutual Fund investments are subject to market risks, read all scheme related documents carefully.

When Can Overnight And Liquid Funds Be Used?

Such funds are often used by investors to temporarily park money during periods of market uncertainty before redeploying it into risk assets.

The highlight of these products is liquidity. If a redemption request is submitted before the cut-off time on a working day, the proceeds are credited to the investor's bank account on the next working day.

Is There A Minimum Time Frame For Investing?

Financial planners suggest investors can use overnight funds if they want to park money for a day to about a week, while liquid funds are suitable for investment horizons of seven days to three months. Such funds are often used to temporarily park surplus money, particularly during periods of heightened market uncertainty.

Liquid funds levy a graded exit load ranging from 0.0070% to 0.0045% if investors withdraw their money within seven days.

How To Use These Funds During Mkt Volatility?

Investors who are waiting for better entry points in equities or other risk assets can keep surplus funds in these schemes, which offer liquidity while generating returns linked to short-term interest rates.

What Are Expected Returns For These Funds?

According to data from Value Research, liquid funds have delivered an average return of 5.9% over the past year, while overnight funds have returned 5.4% during the same period. These returns broadly track short-term interest rates, though the purpose of investing in schemes should be to park idle money and earn more returns than in a bank savings account.

Do Overnight And Liquid Funds Carry Any Risk?

These funds are considered the least risky and volatile among MFs because they invest in highly rated short-term instruments, typically with P1+ credit ratings. The NAV of these funds change mainly due to interest income that accrues daily, including over weekends, rather than sharp market movements.

— PRASHANT MAHESH

Rising shipping costs worry meat exporters

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New Delhi: India's meat exporters are facing logistics disruptions and sharply rising freight costs due to the ongoing West Asia conflict, even as demand from the region remains largely stable, industry representatives said.

Secretary general of the All India Meat & Livestock Exporters Association (AIMLEA), RK Boyal, told **TOI** that exporters do not see any major drop in demand so far, but the biggest concern is the surge in shipping costs.

"Freight rates have gone up significantly, with marine container charges rising sharply in a very short span of time. Such sudden spikes are quite concerning for exporters and make planning shipments extremely difficult," he said. West Asia remains one of the largest markets for Indian meat exports, accounting for a major share of shipments from the country.

Gulzeb Ahmed of HMA Group, a prominent exporter to West Asia, said the Feb to April period is usually the peak demand season, but shipments and new orders slowed due to the crisis.

"West Asia is one of the biggest markets for food items from India, especially Feb to April, which is the highest demand period, but all existing shipments and new orders are on hold."

He said containers are facing delays, and some shipments are being diverted to other ports as vessels struggle to reach their destination, adding that freight charges jumped three-four times overnight and war risk surcharges increased, with many importers unwilling to bear the additional costs.

An executive from the Allana Group, one of India's largest meat exporters, said exporters are trying to continue supplies despite the rising costs.

"Exporters are making every effort to honour commitments and maintain regular supplies to partners in the region," the executive said. Small meat exporters told **TOI** that insurance coverage for shipments to parts of West Asia also became difficult to obtain, while several containers remain stuck at transit hubs, such as Jebel Ali, delaying payments and deliveries. India's total meat exports stood at about $5 billion, of which shipments to West Asia accounted for around $1.6 billion in 2025, up about 23% from $1.3 billion a year earlier.

DEMAND STAYS STABLE

Year	Meat exports to West Asia ($ bn)	YoY % change
2021	0.7	28.5
2022	0.9	28.6
2023	1.1	22.2
2024	1.3	18.2
2025	1.6	23.1

Source: Commerce Ministry

Upgrad signs term sheet to acquire Unacademy

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Bengaluru: Edtech firm Upgrad has signed a term sheet to acquire rival Unacademy in an all-stock transaction, marking a major consolidation in India's education technology sector. The announcement was made by the founders of both companies in separate posts on X on Saturday.

Upgrad founder Ronnie Screwvala said that Unacademy cofounder and CEO **Gaurav Munjal** will continue to lead the company, focusing on developing and scaling online education products. Munjal confirmed that the agreement is structured as a 100% share-swap transaction, with valuation details to be disclosed only after the deal closes and regulatory filings are completed.

Earlier discussions between the two firms had stalled over valuation differences,

Combined platform aims to span test preparation, higher education and professional learning amid consolidation in India's edtech sector

with preliminary talks called off after both sides could not agree on expectations. Screwvala said the new term sheet includes a break fee clause in case the transaction does not close, signaling that negotiations have moved beyond initial exploratory discussions. He added that the combined entity could create a comprehensive learning platform spanning K-12 education, higher education, and lifelong professional learning. "They disrupted the sector once, and now with AI they plan to do it again," he wrote, referencing Unacademy's early role in shaping India's online test-preparation market.

Munjal said the past year had seen significant operational changes at Unacademy, including consolidating offline learning centres with franchise partners and focusing on building core online education products. The company also completed a Rs 50 crore ESOP buyback, with nearly 40% of former employees participating, and its global product Airlearn is gaining traction in the US, UK, Germany, and Canada. Unacademy currently holds more than $100 million in cash reserves.

Founded in 2015, Unacademy grew rapidly during the pandemic-driven edtech boom but has since narrowed its focus to its core test-preparation business. The company underwent leadership restructuring, with cofounders stepping back from operational roles. To adapt to tightening funding conditions, Unacademy also carried out multiple rounds of layoffs and cost-cutting measures. Munjal stated last year that the company had become "default alive," significantly reducing cash burn while maintaining reserves of around Rs 1,200 crore.

The acquisition would bring together two companies that have built scale in different segments of India's edtech market. According to Tracxn data, Unacademy has raised about $880 million across multiple rounds and was last valued at roughly $3.5 billion in 2021, while Upgrad has raised around $329 million and was valued at about $2.2 billion in 2024.

FPIs pull out ₹52,704cr, D-St to take cue from war

New Delhi: Foreign investors withdrew Rs 52,704 crore (around $5.7 billion) from domestic equities in the first fortnight of March, amid escalating tensions in West Asia, the depreciation of the rupee, and concerns over the impact of high crude oil prices on India's growth and corporate earnings. The latest selloff comes after foreign portfolio investors (FPIs) infused Rs 22,615 crore into Indian equities in Feb, the highest monthly inflow in 17 months.

Prior to that, FPIs were net sellers for three consecutive months, withdrawing Rs 35,962 crore in Jan, Rs 22,611 crore in Dec and Rs 3,765 crore in Nov, according to depository data.

So far in March (until March 13), FPIs have sold equities worth about Rs 52,704 crore in the cash market and remained net sellers on all trading days during the month. Market experts attributed the pullout mainly to rising geopolitical tensions in West Asia. Meanwhile, developments surrounding the ongoing conflict in the Gulf and crude oil price movement will be the major factors driving trends in the equity market this week, analysts said. AGENCIES

Veteran Subedar named Tata Trusts consultant

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Mumbai: Tata Trusts has appointed Tata veteran Farokh Subedar, 71, as a consultant, according to people in the know. Subedar, who was with the Tata Group until last year, had shared the board at Tata Investment Corporation with Noel Tata, chair of Tata Trusts.

The foundations are also considering former Tata Steel VP (corporate services) Chanakya Chaudhry for a consultancy role as they seek to bolster their presence in New Delhi. A few months ago, the Trusts leased a 2,000-sq ft office at DLF Centre in Connaught Place.

Chaudhry retired from Tata Steel last year, where Noel serves as vice chairman. An email sent to Noel seeking comment did not elicit a response. Some time ago, Noel had proposed Subedar's name for trusteeship at Trusts, but certain trustees did not approve it, the people said. The new appointment and potential hires come as Noel strengthens his grip over Trusts amid internal infighting.

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Chickpeas may just become the first food to be grown on the Moon, after scientists grew some in simulated moon soil, mixed with worm-produced compost and fungi

SCIENCE OF THE TIMES

QUICK QUIZ

It's a small island country with a population of just over 1.1 crore people, but it has scored big wins in the fight against HIV. In 2015, it became the first country in the world to eliminate mother-to-child transmission of the virus. What is the name of this country? Send your answers to **scienceofthetimes@timesofindia.com**

How Satellites Made From Wood Could Protect Earth's Ozone Shield

At least three large pieces of space junk fall and burn up in the sky daily, releasing toxic particles. Here's a solution

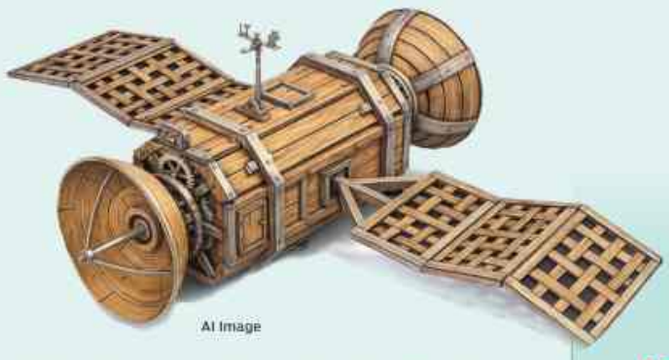
Govind Vijaykumar & Ardhra Nair | TNN

On March 12, a defunct Nasa satellite, weighing nearly 600kg, fell from orbit and burned up over the Pacific. It had run out fuel in 2019.

Estimates show at least three such old satellites fall back to Earth every day, releasing fine metal particles into the atmosphere during re-entry. The environmental impact of these particles has been minimal so far, but what happens when Earth is surrounded by tens of thousands of satellites? A 2021 estimate said in less than a decade, "one in every 15 points of light in the night sky could be a moving satellite", indicating that several hundred may fall back to Earth each day, releasing harmful materials on burn-up, including aluminium and lithium.

Aluminium has long been a concern. Aluminium reacts almost instantly with oxygen to form aluminium oxide or alumina, a substance known to cause ozone depletion. It's feared that alumina from all the re-entries could trigger a shift in polar temperatures, by 2040.

Wooden satellites, with minimal metal, could fix this problem, scientists say, as we insert more objects into low orbit, a place that still has 60% of the 25,000 satellites we've launched since the 1960s. Research from University of British Columbia shows a million satellite projects are currently in various phases of development worldwide.



AI Image

Nasa

LignoSat 1 had aluminium frames, but used Japanese woodworking to join wooden panels without nails. Lignosat 2 is expected to launch late 2026

ESA

Advantages of wood and why it may work very well for small satellites

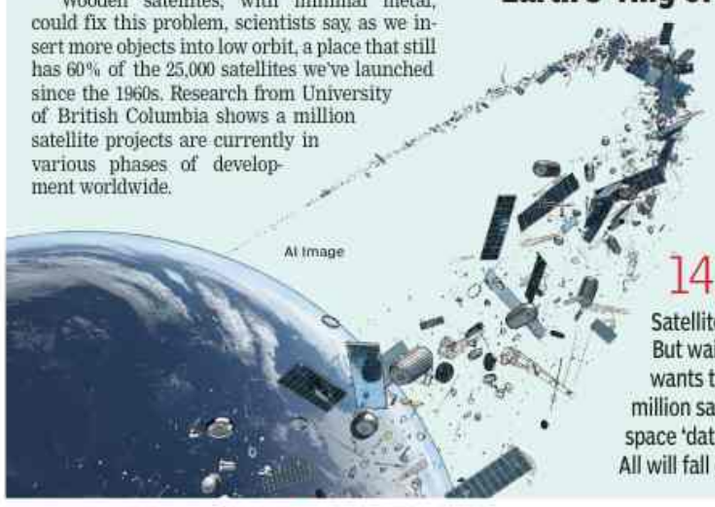
- It wasn't easy finding the perfect wood for space. Japanese scientists in 2020 **tested three types of wood aboard the International Space Station: Magnolia, cherry wood and birch.** Magnolia won as scientists found it held well under stress and its cells were uniform in size, making it easier to shape
- The tests showed wood can work for small communication satellites with fewer moving parts. **Wood lets radio waves through, which means parts like antennae can be housed inside**, making for compact design. Wood also provides thermal insulation, which can protect electronics inside from temperature swings

JAPAN'S LIGNOSAT 1: LITTLE BOX THAT PASSED FIRST TEST

- **LignoSat 1, launched in Nov 2024, was the first ever wood-panelled satellite.** It was tiny; 10cm on each side and weighing just 900gm. It was inserted into orbit 400km above Earth, where it stayed for over 100 days. But the satellite suffered a communication loss. It was developed by Kyoto University and the logging firm Sumitomo Forestry
- **LignoSat 1 didn't come apart in Space:** Despite the loss of communications, Lignosat 1 passed a critical test. Its wood panels stayed intact, surviving violent temperature shifts (121°C to -157°C) as it orbited Earth every 90 mins. Ultimately, this box proved wood could work as outer material for satellites. LignoSat 2 hopes to refine the stechnology
- **A Finnish company has built a craft called WISA Woodsat,** which packs sensors to gather data on how space affects wood. It even has a selfie stick to capture how the wood panels will perform in orbit. It's awaiting clearance for launch

What goes up must come down: Earth's 'ring of trash' poses risks

It's believed there are more than 100 trillion parts of old satellites in orbit around Earth. Imagine these parts, all metal, burning up on re-entry. Studies found aluminium is now in about 10% of stratosphere particles. which could grow to 50% as launches increase



AI Image

14,000
Satellites in orbit. But wait: Space X wants to launch a million satellites for space 'data centres'. All will fall once done

15,000
Tonnes of space objects are in orbit. With about 2,000 launches a year till 2031, this mass will increase

'Wooden satellites step in the right direction. Toxic metals linger for long in atmosphere'

Varun Bhalerao

Rocket launches release toxic chemicals into the upper atmosphere, and most satellites in low-Earth orbit eventually decay and burn up on re-entry. Since aluminium makes up a significant fraction of most satellite bodies, it deposits large quantities of aluminium oxide in the mesosphere, a compound that can catalyse ozone destruction and linger there for decades. This is a slow, invisible form of pollution, but the numbers are not trivial, and will only grow as satellite mega-constellations multiply. Exploring materials like wood is a promising step in the right direction.

And it is not an isolated effort. For instance Manastu Space, an IIT Bombay alumni startup, is developing green propulsion systems to eliminate toxic propellants in satellite thrusters. These are exactly the innovations we need.

Rapid growth of space exploration is delivering enormous benefits, but it comes with a cost that we are only beginning to understand.

— The writer is an astrophysicist at IIT Bombay

'Black rain' in Iran. What causes it and why it's a concern

Times News Network

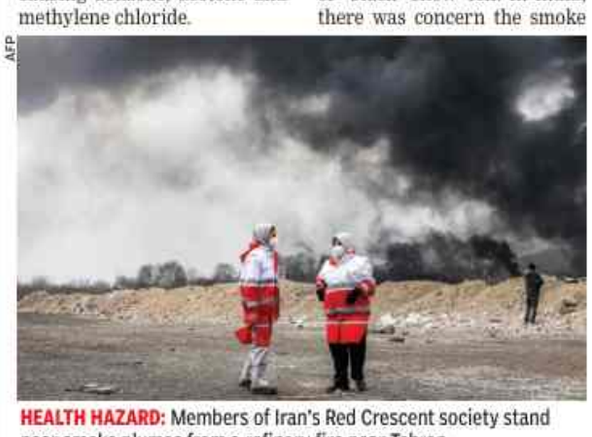
The sun over Tehran was blocked out this week as thick smoke billowed from oil depots bombed by US-Israeli jets.

Residents of the city reported "black rain", which is rain with high levels of atmospheric pollutants in it, likely from the burning of heavy fuel, a low-quality byproduct of oil refining. This means this dark rain over Tehran likely contains hazardous cancer-causing benzene, acetone and methylene chloride.

some repeat of what Iranians and millions more in nearby countries experienced in the early '90s, when Saddam Hussein's forces set off the "worst environmental disaster after Chernobyl and Bhopal", as they blew up 700 Kuwaiti oil wells during the first Gulf war.

The fires burned for 10 months before they were extinguished; 90% of them with just seawater. But those infernos caused a catastrophe, effects of which were felt as far as the Himalayas where two inches of 'black snow' fell. In India, there was concern the smoke

AFP



HEALTH HAZARD: Members of Iran's Red Crescent society stand near smoke plumes from a refinery fire near Tehran

People are already feeling the effects. "The skin on my face is sore and raw. It burns," Time magazine quoted a resident of Tehran as saying.

Unlike combustion inside car engines, which is total, the burning in the oil depots would've been less complete, releasing unburnt particles into the air. These particles can trigger a range of health conditions in people, including cardiovascular disease, lung cancer and even diabetes.

Then there's acid rain. The oil in the depots also contains sulphur and nitrogen, which when burnt, form oxides that can react with moisture to trigger acidic precipitation. This rain can irritate the eyes and throat. And if it seeps into waterways, it can alter chemistry and harm aquatic life.

These hazards are a worri-

could stop the monsoon; in Bahrain, temperature dropped 10°C; Soviet devices began to detect soot in the air; and Turkey, Bulgaria, Pakistan all saw 'black rain'.

Hardest hit was of course Kuwait where experts said environmental recovery would take at least 100 years. Nearly 90% of the soil that was contaminated by oozing oil is still exposed to the environment.

Firefighters sent to douse the wells suffered health issues. "The doctor said it was as if I was smoking three packs of cigarettes every day for three years," a woman firefighter told The Guardian in 2021, 30 years after event.

Experts have warned the fresh outbreak of war risks a repeat of the disaster. For now, Iranians in the affected zones have been told to stay indoors.

LAST WEEK'S QUICK QUIZ **Question on March 9:** It was thought the Tyrannosaurus rex took 25 years to reach its full size (around 8 tonnes). But a new analysis shows it took longer. How many years did the T rex take to grow to full size, according to recent data? **Answer:** 40 years

TIMES NATION

'Phantom officer' ploy: How criminals exploit top cops' names in digital arrests

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New Delhi: The phone vibrates at an odd hour, and before you can even say hello, a voice laden with the practised gravitas of a high-ranking law enforcement official cuts through the silence. In the world of the 'digital arrest' scam, the first weapon of the cybercriminal is not a virus or a phishing link, but a name. These are not random names plucked from a phonebook; they are the names of men who have built decades-long reputation as the iron fist of the state.

By invoking figures like Daya Nayak — the high profile "encounter specialist" known for his pursuit of the underworld in Mumbai — or former Delhi police commissioner Neeraj Kumar, scammers are leveraging a specific kind of cultural fear.

Recent cases from Gujarat have highlighted this evolution in social engineering. In one harrowing incident in Ahmedabad, a retired professional was kept under 'surveillance' for over 48 hours, during which the fraudsters presented themselves as subordinates to "DCP Daya Nayak". The scammers didn't just use the name; they adopted the persona. They spoke of "secret investigations", "national security implications" and "immediate custodial interrogation" if the victim dared to end the video call.

"By using a name synonymous with high-stakes policing, the criminals create a psychological cage. The target isn't just afraid of the police; they are afraid of the specific, uncompromising legend that the name Daya Nayak represents," says a cyber cell cop.

Similarly, in other rackets, the name of former Delhi police commissioners Neeraj Kumar, SN Shrivastava or Rakesh Asthana has been brandished like a badge of absolute authority. Even if the real Neeraj Kumar or Shrivastava have long moved on from active duty, scammers exploit their names and reputation with surgical precision.

WEAPONISING REPUTATION

MODUS OPERANDI

Scammers use names of high-profile officers such as Daya Nayak and Neeraj Kumar to leverage their 'encounter specialist' status, instantly inducing fear in targets

By 'branding' their scams with famous names, criminals create a sense of inescapable authority, convincing people that they are part of high-stakes national security probes

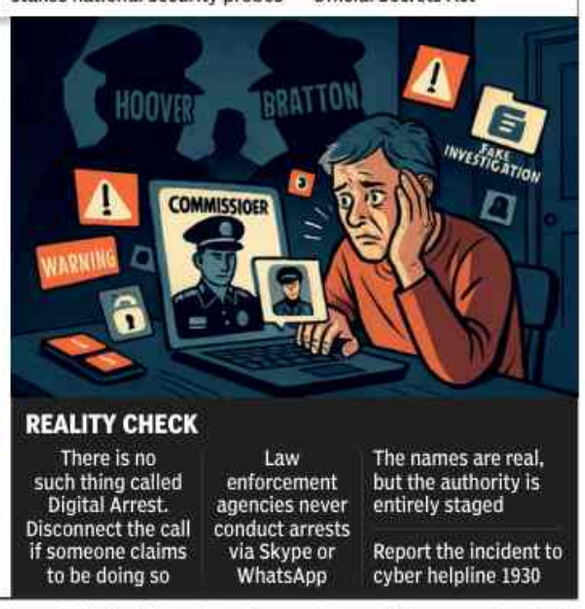
Victims, like in recent Gujarat cases, are kept under 'virtual surveillance' for days, forbidden from contacting family under the guise of the Official Secrets Act

IDENTITY PIPELINE

- Much like terror outfits reassign titles such as 'Abu Dujana' to new operatives, cyber-syndicates use names like 'CBI prosecutor Vikram Goswami' as fixed designations for multiple callers
- When one 'cell' is busted, the persona is simply handed to another operator, ensuring the 'legend' of the fake official remains active across different states and victims

Serving and former cops whose names are generally misused by cyber scammers

Daya Nayak | Neeraj Kumar | Rakesh Asthana | SN Shrivastava | Vivek Phansalkar | Sadanand Date | Rajesh Dandotiya | Navjot Simi | Sameer Wankhede



REALITY CHECK

There is no such thing called Digital Arrest. Disconnect the call if someone claims to be doing so

Law enforcement agencies never conduct arrests via Skype or WhatsApp

The names are real, but the authority is entirely staged

Report the incident to cyber helpline 1930

This deliberate "branding" of authority is among the most chilling aspects of modern cyber-extortion. It operates much like the internal structure of global terror outfits. In organisations like Lashkar-e-Taiba, the name "Abu Dujana" or "Abu Hamza" is rarely just a person; it is a designation. When one operative carrying the title is neutralised, the mantle is passed to the next, ensuring that the fear it inspires remains immortal. Cyber-syndicates have adopted this exact model. Take the name "CBI prosecutor Vikram Goswami", who has appeared in dozens of FIRs across different states. There is no singular "Vikram Goswami" making these calls; rather, he is a ghost in the machine. To the scammers, "Vikram Goswami" is a script, a specific set of aggressive legal jargon and a curated background on a Skype call.

The background of the video call looks like a functional police station, complete with files, national emblems and the distant sound of wireless sets. The man on the screen wears the uniform, but it is the name on the nameplate — often a name the victim has seen in news headlines — that seals the trap.

The use of names like Daya Nayak serves a dual purpose here: it validates the secrecy of the "operation" and ensures the victim feels that any attempt to verify the call would result in a violent, late-night raid.

Cybercriminals also execute the scams by sending forged PDFs over WhatsApp that feature official Delhi Police logos, fake govt stamps and the fraudulent signatures and photographs of IPS officers to intimidate victims.

To heighten the realism, they conduct video calls while wearing police uniforms, often with incorrect insignia. During these interactions, they frequently escalate the psychological pressure by claiming to transfer the case to higher authorities like the CBI, ED or RBI.

"Fraudsters often use the designation of the DCP (IFSO) (Intelligence Fusion and Strategic Operations) without a specific name, or by attaching a random name to the real office address (Dwarka, Sector 19)," said a cyber cell cop.

However, for the citizen, the only defence to such impersonation is the realisation that the law does not operate through Skype or WhatsApp. "No matter how famous the name on the other end of the line might be, the real police don't "arrest" you through a smartphone screen. Once you stop believing in the ghost, the handcuffs vanish," says retired senior cop whose name was misused in several cases.

Citing 75 yrs of age, SC reduces ex-official's jail term to 1 year

▸Continued from P 1

The proceedings in HC were comparatively faster, and the case was decided in six years in April 2012. HC rejected his appeal and upheld the trial court's order on conviction and sentence.

But the apex court took 14 years to decide his plea against conviction and sentence. His appeal was first heard in Aug 2012 and listed on 21 dates before different benches in the past 14 years.

A bench of Justices Pankaj Mithal and P B Varale finally brought the curtain down on the case. Upholding his conviction, the bench said there was no error in the orders passed by the trial court and HC. But considering the man's age of 75 years, the apex court reduced the sentence to one-year imprisonment, which is the minimum punishment under Section 13(2) of PC Act.

Upholding the man's conviction, the bench said there was no error in the orders passed by the trial court and HC

"We are of the opinion that the trial court as well as high court, on appreciation of evidence, committed no error in holding the appellant guilty for the offences committed under Section 7 and Section 13(2) of PC Act. As such, the interference of this court insofar as conviction being recorded by the trial court and upheld by the high court is not warranted, but at the same time, considering the circumstances, namely, the appellant was of the age of approximately 40 years at the time of offence in question and now, he is approximately 75 years of age... we are of the opinion that the sentence awarded by the trial court and upheld by the high court can be modified to the extent of minimum sentence for the said offences," the bench said in its order.

MP 'faked' drug test with water sample during farmhouse bust

▸Continued from P 1

The Moinabad property is owned by former Tandur MLA Pilot Rohith Reddy of BRS. Delhi-based businessman Namith Sharma, whose urine samples were found to contain traces of cocaine during Saturday's raid, has also been charged with attempt-to-murder and assault.

He has been booked under sections 109 and 131 of the BNS for firing at police with a .32 revolver belonging to Rohith's brother Rithesh Reddy Pajugula.

Apart from Rohith and MP Mahesh Kumar, those accused of substance abuse are Rithesh, Namith, businessman Tiruveedula Arjun Reddy and advocate Kaushik Ravi. "All 11 people at the farmhouse party have been charged with violation of the Telangana Prohibition Act. We have invoked the NDPS Act against the six who have tested positive (for meth or cocaine). Three of them — Namith, Rohith and Rithesh — additionally stand accused of violating the Arms Act," Moinabad DCP Yogesh Gautham said.

The drug bust at former BRS MLA Pilot Rohith Reddy's farmhouse in Moinabad on Saturday night

Rohith, Namith and Rithesh have been arrested while Mahesh Kumar and the other two guests received bail. They have all been asked to visit a deaddiction centre, an official said.

During Saturday night's drug bust, MP Mahesh Kumar cleared the urine test after allegedly filling his sample cup with water from the washroom instead of urine.

"A blood test conducted Sunday revealed meth. The same test confirmed substance abuse by the other five who tested positive for cocaine," said SP R Girdhar of the state's Elite Action Group for Drug Law Enforcement (EAGLE).

CM N Chandrababu Naidu ordered an internal inquiry by TDP, with explicit instructions to Mahesh Kumar to stay away from party events "until the matter is clarified", sources said.

BRS working president KT Rama Rao said he was willing to undergo a drug test at any time, responding to Telangana PCC chief Mahesh Kumar Goud's demand that all public representatives be put through such checks.

EAM speaks to Saudi, UAE counterparts on W Asia crisis

Times News Network

New Delhi: India's continued engagement with the Gulf saw external affairs minister S Jaishankar speaking to his Saudi Arabia and UAE counterparts on the regional situation and latest developments in the conflict in the West Asia region.

The minister has spoken to his counterparts from all GCC countries since the military conflict started on Feb 28, calling for resolving all issues through dialogue and emphasising the well-being of the Indian diaspora.

Jaishankar is currently on a visit to Brussels from March 15-16 at the invitation of EU foreign policy chief Kaja Kallas to interact with foreign ministers of the 27 EU member states at the Foreign Affairs Council Meeting.

Jaishankar is currently in Brussels at the invitation of EU foreign policy chief Kaja Kallas to interact with foreign ministers of the 27 EU member states at the Foreign Affairs Council Meeting

During the visit, Jaishankar will also hold meetings with the leadership of the European Union (EU), and his counterparts from Belgium and other EU member states. This is the first high-level bilateral visit from either side since the two sides finalised a free trade agreement in Jan this year.

The visit is taking place in the middle of the raging war in the West Asia region.

Jaishankar and Kallas had spoken earlier to discuss issues related to the conflict. The Indian minister is likely to stress on the need for an early end to the conflict in his engagements with his European counterparts.

"The visit of the external affairs minister coming soon after the historic 16th India-EU Summit is expected to further deepen India's strategic partnership with the European Union," said the ministry of external affairs said in a statement.

TIMES SPORT

THE TIMES OF INDIA, BENGALURU | MONDAY, MARCH 16, 2026

INDIA PACER SAYALI SATGHARE SAYS 10 YEARS OF HARD WORK IS BEHIND HER RECENT SUCCESS

LEWIS HAMILTON FEELS CLOSER TO WINNING AGAIN AFTER FIRST PODIUM FINISH SINCE 2024

BEYOND THE BLING

Amid The Noise Around His Flashy Lifestyle, Hardik Remains India's Most Reliable Big-Match Allrounder

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PTI

HARDIK PANDYA IN 2026 T20 WC

M	Runs	50s	Avg	SR	Wkts	ER	Avg
9	217	2	27.12	160.74	9	8.81	32.33

> **Cricket is his first love. It takes precedence over everything else. But away from the field, he enjoys his life and does not worry what people say. He doesn't read papers or social media chatter."**
> **—Source close to Hardik**

Mumbai: Of late, Hardik Pandya has been making headlines for reasons beyond cricket. His cosy celebrations with girlfriend Mahieka Sharma after India's triumph in the 2026 T20 World Cup drew criticism, with a Nagpur-based advocate even filing a police complaint. Reports of the allrounder buying a 12-crore Ferrari 12Cilindri have added to the chatter around his flamboyant lifestyle — from his blonde hairstyle to the trademark gold chain.

Yet, amid all the noise, Pandya's crucial role in India's back-to-back T20 World Cup triumphs in 2024 and 2026 has not received the same attention.

In both the 2026 semifinal against England at the Wankhede Stadium and the 2024 final against South Africa in Barbados, Pandya delivered decisive spells at the death, proving the perfect pace-bowling foil to the peerless Jasprit Bumrah. Bumrah rightly walked away with most of the accolades, but Pandya's contributions were equally vital.

In the 2026 semifinal, Pandya chipped in with a 12-ball 27 before returning figures of 2/38 in four overs in a high-scoring contest.

When he came on to bowl the 19th over, England needed 39 off two overs, with Jacob Bethell — who blasted 105 off 48 balls — threatening to chase down India's daunting 253. After Bethell launched the first ball for six, Pandya responded brilliantly, conceding just three runs from the next five deliveries and dismissing Sam Curran.

With 30 needed off the final over, Pandya then produced a moment of brilliance in the field — a bullet throw from long-off that ran out Bethell at the start of the 20th over, effectively sealing the match for India.

Overall, Pandya finished the tournament with nine wickets in nine matches at 32.33, an economy of 8.81, while scoring 217 runs at a strike rate of 160.74, including two fifties.

With the bat, one of his key contributions came against Netherlands in Ahmedabad, where his 21-ball 30, including three sixes, helped India recover from 110/4 in the 14th over. His 76-run stand with Shivam Dube lifted India to 196/6, a total that proved just enough in the end.

Two years earlier, after enduring perhaps the toughest IPL season of his career with Mumbai Indians, Pandya bounced back magnificently in the 2024 T20 World Cup, taking 11 wickets in eight matches at 17.36 while scoring 114 runs at 48, including a fifty.

In the 2024 final in Barbados, while Bumrah's 2/18 grabbed the headlines, it was Pandya who turned the game with figures of 3/20 in three overs. When he returned for the 17th over, South Africa needed 26 off 24 balls. Pandya conceded just four runs and removed the dangerous Heinrich Klaasen, who had blasted 52 (27b).

Entrusted with the final over, Pandya then had David Miller caught by Suryakumar Yadav, whose stunning running catch sealed India's dramatic seven-run win.A source close to Pandya says cricket remains the allrounder's primary focus, especially around major tournaments.

"Cricket is his first love. It takes precedence over everything else. But away from the field, he enjoys his life and doesn't worry about what people say. His philosophy is simple: live life fully, but when it comes to cricket, be completely dedicated."

According to the source, Pandya enters a different 'zone' before major tournaments. "He was rested from the ODI series against New Zealand in Jan and focused entirely on preparing for the T20 World Cup. He trained twice daily, stayed disciplined and avoided social media. He believes in practising in silence rather than showing everything on Instagram."

The source added that Pandya even logs off social media a month before major tournaments. "He doesn't read newspapers or follow online chatter. His focus is only on winning the trophy."

Over the years, Pandya's understanding of the game has also improved significantly. "As a batter he reads bowlers well, and as a bowler he reads batters well. He may not be the quickest, but he uses his intelligence and variations — especially that outswinger — to get the job done."

Though no longer India's captain in any format, the 32-year-old has embraced his role as a senior leader in the side. During the World Cup, he was often seen encouraging teammates, especially fellow allrounder Shivam Dube, in team huddles.

Quite simply, Pandya remains one of the finest white-ball allrounders in world cricket — arguably India's best since the legendary Kapil Dev.

Frequent injuries may have cost him the white-ball captaincy, but Pandya has repeatedly returned leaner, fitter and hungrier.

Nearly eight years ago, after playing his eighth Test at Southampton against England, Pandya stepped away from red-ball cricket to extend his white-ball career — a decision that has clearly paid off. In limited-overs cricket, Pandya remains the player India can rely on with both bat and ball.

> **Almost everything coming together where Indian cricket has always had great potential and it's realising that potential on the field as well. Off the field, we've always had everything. On the field, it's been great to see that potential being realised."**
> **—Rahul Dravid** | EX-COACH

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BCCI AWARDS

Pics: Tarun Rawat

STILL SMILING: The Indian T20 World Cup-winning team was felicitated at the BCCI awards

> **From where we left in 2024 under Rahul sir, we knew that we need to show a lot of trust and belief in the players. Sometimes in sport, you won't be seeing good things happening around, there will be lots of ups and downs. When you come into a big tournament like this, it's really important to stand by the players."**
> **—Suryakumar Yadav**

Former India captain and head coach Rahul Dravid (left) and ex-pacer and ex-BCCI President Roger Binny were honoured with the Col. CK Nayudu BCCI lifetime achievement award on Sunday

Time for cricket to plan for Commonwealth Games and Olympics, says ICC chief Shah

TIMES NEWS NETWORK

ICC chairman Jay Shah speaks at the SJFI convention in New Delhi on sunday

New Delhi: A week after hosting the T20 World Cup in India, International Cricket Council (ICC) chairman Jay Shah said that the Indian cricket board (BCCI) and other sports federations must plan together to stage cricket in Commonwealth Games and Olympics, starting with the CWG to be hosted in India in 2030.

" While we focus on present competitions, we must also prepare for the future cycle — the 2030 Commonwealth Games, the 2032 Brisbane Olympics and the 2036 Olympics. Planning for these events has to begin well in advance if India wants to strengthen its global sporting footprint," Shah said at a conclave organised by the Sports Journalists Federation of India here on Sunday.

Reflecting on the recent success of Indian cricket, Shah described the 2019–2026 period as a golden phase for the sport. "From 2019 to 2026 has been a golden period for Indian cricket. We have achieved success across formats and age groups, from U19 tournaments to major ICC competitions," he said.

Shah also called for greater collaboration between administrators, corporates, athletes and the media.

Sanju can win you the game in the first six overs: Gambhir

New Delhi: Sanju Samson has the firepower to take the game away from the opposition in the Powerplay when at his explosive best, India head coach Gautam Gambhir said.

"We know what Sanju can do; there was never any doubt about his talent and explosiveness. If he gets going, he can win you the game in the first six overs," Gambhir said on Jio Star. Samson was not part of the XI earlier after a poor series against New Zealand.

But given a chance in the must-win game against Zimbabwe, Samson scored a 15-ball 24. In India's last three games, he scored 97 not out vs West Indies in a virtual quarterfinal at the Eden Gardens, 89 vs England in the semis in Mumbai and 89 vs New Zealand in the final at Ahmedabad. "I told him in the gym that you'll be playing against Zimbabwe. He said, 'Let it come'. That's the kind of casual conversation we have. It's not like a head coach and player's relationship. Most of our one-on-one conversations happen during practice sessions," he said . PTI

TRAILBLAZERS AND CHAMPIONS: Former India players Shubhangi Kulkarni (left) and Diana Edulji. (Right): Smriti Mandhana, who won the women's international cricketer of the year award for the fifth time, with Arundhati Reddy (C) and Jemimah Rodrigues (R) in New Delhi on Sunday

And thus died the follow-on, or did it?

India's fightback at the Eden Gardens did make captains and teams wary of enforcing the follow-on. Australia, even under successful captains like Ricky Ponting and Adam Gilchrist enforced it just four times out of the 14 in which they had a choice to do so. Steve Waugh though enforced it seven times post Kolkata and won every Test!

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Getty Images

While Australian bowlers Glenn Mcgrath and Shane Warne told Steve Waugh to bat again as they were weary, Michael Kasprowicz (in pic) said he was fine if the follow-on was enforced. He went on to regret the decision as he bowled 35 wicketless overs

When Steve Waugh's Australians arrived in India, riding a 15-match winning streak — extended to 16 after a 10-wicket win at the Wankhede — they carried an air of intimidation. Waugh indulged in some aura farming while addressing the media after the win in Mumbai. "I think we made some psychological dents in the opposition," he had said with a smirk.

A week later, it was 31. In the second Test at Eden Gardens in Kolkata, India lasted just 58.1 overs in the first innings and were dismissed for 171 in reply to Australia's 445.

Australia smelled blood. They had a lead of 274 against a batting line-up low on confidence. Their attack featured Glenn McGrath, Shane Warne, Jason Gillespie and Michael Kasprowicz, and the so-called "final frontier" of conquering India seemed close. Notably, the bowlers had delivered just 12 overs on Day 3, so fatigue hardly appeared to be an issue.

Warne, however, saw things differently. During commentary for Sky Sports during a 2020 England-Pakistan Test at Southampton's Rose Bowl, he recalled the debate around enforcing the follow-on.

"It was 45 degrees, we'd been out on the field a long time, and the wicket was going to get worse," Warne said. He remembered Waugh checking on his bowlers as India collapsed. McGrath admitted he was "a bit weary", while Kasprowicz, who had bowled only 13 overs, was eager to continue. Warne felt enforcing the follow-on was a mistake. If Australia had batted again and stretched the lead beyond 450, the game could have unfolded very differently.

Former Australia coach John Buchanan has also admitted that the follow-on decision was one of his poorest tactical calls.

Waugh, however, remains unapologetic. In an interview with Cricket Australia, he has said, "That's the way we played at the time — we played positively. I would have liked to have won, but honestly, I haven't spent one second regretting not beating them or enforcing the follow-on."

The Eden Gardens Test is widely viewed as the match that altered perceptions about the follow-on. Before the game, enforcing it with a 200-run lead was the default aggressive move. But the epic 376-run partnership between VVS Laxman and Rahul Dravid as India followed on — turned the match and delivered one of cricket's most improbable victories.

The psychological impact was immense. Between Botham's Ashes in 1981 at Headingley and the Kolkata Test, captains enforced the follow-on 82 times, winning 64 of those. The only two defeats came against Australia — ironically, the team enforcing it in 2001.

Kolkata showed that if a side gets a solid start and two set batters on a true pitch even the best bowling attack can be neutralised. Waugh's ultra-attacking fields also helped India pierce gaps and score freely.

Fatigue eventually became a factor. Australia's bowlers delivered 178 overs in India's second innings. By the fifth day, they were exhausted, allowing India to seize control.

In modern cricket, protecting fast bowlers has become a priority. Enforcing the follow-on means bowlers must return to the field within minutes of finishing an innings, raising injury risks — especially during long seasons. With rest days long gone from Tests, captains have grown more cautious.

India captain Shubman Gill faced this dilemma during a Test against the West Indies in Delhi. After India declared at 518 for 5 and dismissed the visitors for 248, Gill enforced the follow-on despite his bowlers already delivering 81.5 overs.

The fatigue showed. West Indies batted 118.5 overs in the second innings before setting India a modest 121-run target. India chased it comfortably but would likely have preferred a lighter workload for the bowlers.

Today, captains often choose to bat again. Doing so ensures they bowl last on a deteriorating pitch that may offer sharp turn or variable bounce. It also spares batters the pressure of a fourth-innings chase.

Another reason is time management. Even a slow third-innings effort of 50 or 60 overs eats into the match, reducing the chances of defeat and making a draw or victory more likely.

Interestingly, the statistics still favour the follow-on. Since the 2001 Eden Gardens Test, captains have enforced it 114 times and won 89 of those matches. There have been 21 draws, and only one defeat — when Ben Stokes' England lost to New Zealand by one run in Wellington in 2023.

Waugh may still have his critics. But he has a statistic ready: after Kolkata, he enforced the follow-on seven more times — and won every one of those Tests.

Coach Marijne impressed, but team still a work in progress

Dutchman Says Technical Side Still Needs Improvement

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Suman Reddy D

Coach Sjoerd Marijne was impressed with the way the team created opportunities in the FIH World Cup Qualifiers

Hyderabad: Coach Sjoerd Marijne kicked off his second stint on an impressive note as the Indian women qualified for this year's World Cup without breaking sweat.

Though they lost 2-0 to England in the final of the FIH World Cup Qualifiers on Saturday night, the girls gave a good account of themselves.

The Dutchman was impressed with his new batch, though it's still work in progress. "We were focused and played a good match (final). But there are a lot of things we can improve, of course. This is our first tournament together," said Marijne, adding that he wanted to see how the girls would react under pressure.

"I saw how the girls reacted in the semifinal and in the final. I'm happy we played against a good team in the final. I saw their performance under pressure, which can't be done in a training camp. You can't create this pressure. So that was good. And then I could see a lot of things, which I keep for myself," he added.

The team, a mix of youth and experience, was fluid in the midfield and formidable at the back. But despite winning 37 penalty corners, a lot more than their rivals, they could convert only six. In the final, they had four. While the English converted their two PCs, India faltered. In the semifinals, they converted only one of the nine PCs.

Marijne, however, was impressed with the way the girls created opportunities. "PC conversion is a concern. There is a lot of room for improvement. But I would worry if you don't create chances. If you don't create PCs, you're not breaking lines, then we would really have a problem. But we created chances even under pressure. On the technical side, we need to be better. The decision-making needs to be better. In the circle, we need to take better positions," the coach said.

Apart from the hat-trick against Wales, drag-flicker Navneet Kaur missed several chances. But along with Lalremsiami, she led the attack well. The midfield of Salima Tete, Sunelita Toppo and Sakshi Rana did a good job of holding the ball and feeding the forwards.

The fact that the defence conceded just 10 penalty corners in five matches and that England hardly penetrated the circle in the third and fourth quarters of the final showed how effective Indian defenders Sushila Chanu, Udita, Nikki Pradhan, Manisha and Ishika were throughout the week.

Salima counted several positives. "With a number of new girls and a new coach, I thought it would be difficult. But I am happy with the way we adjusted. Whatever mistakes we made here, I am confident we will rectify them in the next tournament," Salima added.

Dowman sets PL record

Max Dowman, 16, propelled Arsenal closer to the title by becoming the Premier League's youngest ever goalscorer in a dramatic 2-0 win against Everton on Saturday as Manchester City stumbled in a 1-1 draw at West Ham. Mikel Arteta's men are edging towards a first league title in 22 years as their advantage over City, who have a game in hand, now stands at nine points. Arsenal struggled to break down obdurate Everton until the teenage substitute turned the game in the final moments.

There was still time for Dowman to run the length of the pitch and slot into the net with Pickford nowhere to be seen after coming up for an Everton corner in stoppage time. Aged just 16 & 73 days, Dowman is the youngest scorer in the history of the Premier League and in Arsenal's history. AGENCIES

SNAP SHOTS

Chandrika wins gold

India concluded its campaign at the World Boxing Futures Cup with a haul of five medals, including one gold, in Bangkok on Sunday. Leading the charge was Chandrika Pujari, who delivered a commanding performance in the women's 51 kg final to defeat Uzbekistan's Mardonova Nazokat with a unanimous decision to stand atop the podium. Three Indian boxers — Gunjan (48kg) , Joyshree Devi (54kg) and L Ambekar Meetei (men's 50kg) — ended with silver medals after losing in the finals.

Kochi to host India vs Hong Kong match: Indian men's football team's final match of the AFC Asian Cup Saudi Arabia 2027 Qualifiers against Hong Kong will be held in Kochi on March 31. India, who are out of the reckoning for a place in the Asian Cup, will aim to end their qualifying campaign on a high. Despite it being a dead rubber, as Hong Kong have also been eliminated, the match still carries significance for both teams with FIFA ranking points on offer.

'Finalissima' clash cancelled: The 'Finalissima' clash between Euro 2024 winners Spain and world champions Argentina set to take place on March 27 in Qatar has been cancelled, UEFA said on Sunday. The European football governing body said in a statement that it was "not possible to reach agreement with Argentina" over an alternative date and location, required because of the Middle East war affecting the region.

Wembanyama stars: Victor Wembanyama racked up 32 points, 12 rebounds, eight assists and four blocked shots in his return to lead the host San Antonio Spurs to a 115-102 victory over the Charlotte Hornets on Saturday. **Results:** Philadelphia 104 bt Brooklyn 97; Atlanta 122 bt Milwaukee 99; San Antonio 115 bt Charlotte 102; Boston 111 bt Washington 100; bt Orlando 121 bt Miami 117; LA Lakers 127 bt Denver 125 (OT); Sacramento 118 bt LA Clippers 109.

F1 calls off April races: Formula One's Bahrain and Saudi Arabian Grands Prix will not take place in April due to the conflict in the Middle East, the sport announced on Saturday. The announcement had been widely expected and the statement by the Liberty media-owned sport and governing FIA, as well as local promoters, said the races will not be replaced on the calendar next month.

Snigdha wears crown: Karnataka's Snigdha Kanta capped an impressive week by clinching the girls' singles title at the ITF World Tennis Tour Juniors J60 in Gurugram. Snigdha defeated fellow state player Padmapriya Ramesh Kumar 6–4, 6–4 in the final.

BARCELONA THRASH SEVILLA

Raphinha Scores Hat-Trick; Man United Beat Aston Villa

Raphinha bagged a hat-trick as Barcelona thrashed Sevilla 5-2 to restore their four-point lead at the top of La Liga on Sunday. After Real Madrid cut the gap by beating Elche on Saturday the Spanish champions responded by romping to a comfortable victory.

Dani Olmo and Joao Cancelo also struck for Hansi Flick's side, who host Newcastle in the Champions League on Wednesday.

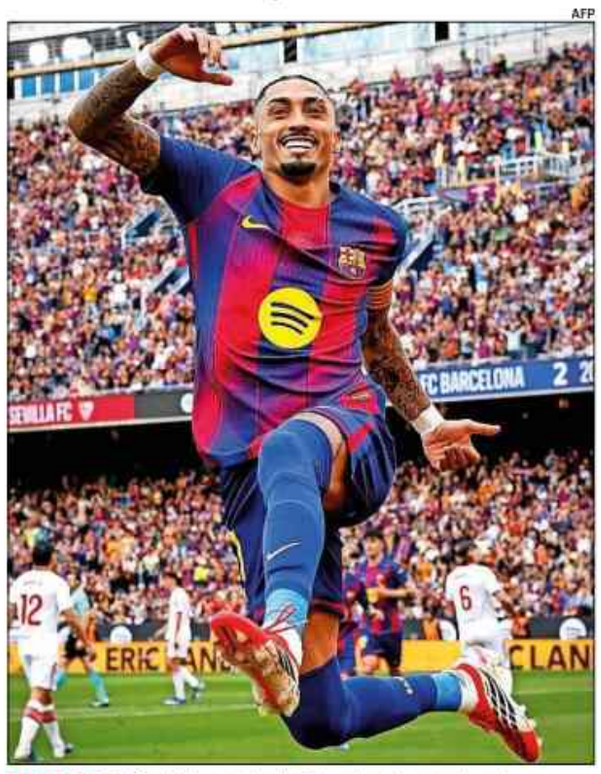
Fans streamed to the stadium to vote in the club's presidential elections, with either Joan Laporta or Victor Font to be announced the new

FOOTBALL

chief. After the 1-1 draw in Newcastle in the last-16 first leg, Flick left Lamine Yamal on the bench and handed youngster Xavi Espart his first start, at right-back.

Barcelona were handed two penalties by a sorry Sevilla side to get off to the perfect start at the partially-rebuilt Camp Nou, which finally received clearance to open the north stand. Around 56,000 fans attended and they were able to watch a fairly straightforward rout of the Andalucians, 14th. Djibril Sow clumsily clipped rampaging Barca full-back Cancelo in the box and Raphinha dinked home from the spot to open the scoring in the ninth minute. The Brazilian winger was afforded another penalty to put Barca two goals up when Jose Angel Carmona, lying on the floor, handled as Cancelo tried to dribble around him.

AFP



FLYING HIGH: Raphinha celebrates Barcelona's second goal

This time Raphinha fired it low to the left and although Odysseas Vlachodimos went the right way he could not keep it out. The hosts netted a third in the 38th minute when Marc Bernal's deflected cross from the left found Olmo, who produced a clinical finish. Sevilla pulled one back before the break when Juanlu Sanchez got in behind Cancelo and crossed for Oso to score unmarked at the back post.

Raphinha completed his hat-trick early in the second half with a heavily deflected shot as Barca strolled in the spring sunshine. Cancelo capped an impressive attacking display with a goal of his own, driving into the box and finishing through Vlachodimos' legs.

Barca coach Flick sent on 21-year-old midfielder Gavi for the final 10 minutes, for his first appearance since August after suffering a severe knee injury. Sow pulled another one back for Sevilla in stoppage time, nodding home Oso's cross, with Barcelona already thinking about Newcastle's visit on Wednesday.

UNITED BOLSTER CL BID

Manchester United bolstered their bid to qualify for the Champions League with a vital 3-1 win against top-four rivals Aston Villa on Sunday. Michael Carrick's side took the lead through Casemiro's second-half opener at Old Trafford before Ross Barkley hauled Villa level.

United finished strongly, with Matheus Cunha and Benjamin Sesko scoring in the closing stages to seal Carrick's seventh win in nine games since taking over as interim boss. Sitting third in the Premier League, United are three points clear of fourth-placed Villa in the race to reach the Champions League via a top-four finish.

Results: English Premier League: Crystal Palace 0 drew with Leeds 0, Manchester United 3 (Casemiro 53, Cunha 71, Sesko 81) bt Aston Villa 1 (Barkley 64), Nottingham Forest 0 drew Fulham 0. **German Bundesliga:** Werder Bremen 0 lost to Mainz 2 (Nebel 5, Jae-sung 52). AGENCIES

Teen Antonelli triumphs

19-Year-Old Becomes Second-Youngest F1 Race Winner

Shanghai: A tearful Kimi Antonelli celebrated a breakthrough first win of his Formula One career on Sunday after leading championship-leading teammate George Russell in a Mercedes one-two in China from pole position. The 19-year-old Italian driver became the second-youngest race winner in the sport's history after four-times world champion Max Verstappen, who took his first victory with Red Bull at 18 in 2016.

Lewis Hamilton finished a distant third, the seven-times world champion's first podium since he joined Ferrari last year and first since Las Vegas 2024, with teammate Charles Leclerc fourth after a lively battle between the two. McLaren's reigning

CHINESE GRAND PRIX

world champion Lando Norris and teammate Oscar Piastri both failed to start due to problems with their cars.

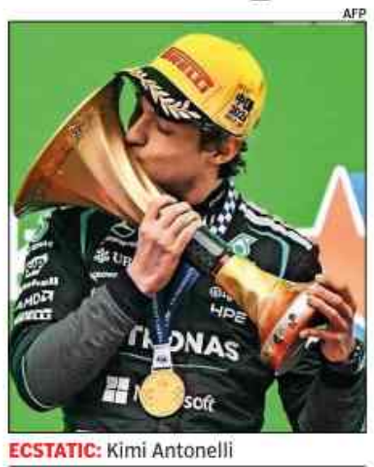
"Thank you everyone. Thank you so much. You made me achieve one of my dreams," said Antonelli over the radio after taking the chequered flag. "I'm speechless. I'm about to cry to be honest," he said in his first interview as a winner in front of the Shanghai circuit crowd, before doing just that.

NERVOUS LAST THREE LAPS

It was a nervous finish for the Italian, who locked up and went wide with three laps to go, cutting his lead over Russell to 7.4 seconds and finishing 5.515 clear.

It was Mercedes' second successive one-two in two grand prix after Russell led Antonelli in the Australian opener last weekend. Russell, who won the Saturday sprint with Antonelli fifth, saw his championship lead cut to four points from 11, with the Briton on 51 to Antonelli's 47 with Leclerc third on 34 and Hamilton 33.

AFP



ECSTATIC: Kimi Antonelli

Oliver Bearman was fifth for Haas ahead of Alpine's Pierre Gasly and Racing Bulls' Liam Lawson. Isack Hadjar took eighth for Red Bull, after teammate Verstappen retired from the race, with Carlos Sainz ninth for Williams and Franco Colapinto finally back in the points for Alpine in 10th after failing to score last year.

FOUR CARS OUT BEFORE START

The race started with just 18 cars and both McLarens in the team garages.

Norris's problem was detected well before the start but Australian Piastri, who has yet to complete a race lap this season after crashing on his way to the grid in Melbourne, was wheeled off.

Russell had started second after a problem in the final phase of qualifying reduced his ability to fight for pole, and he also had to fight back after an early safety car period left him second in the queue for fresh tyres at Mercedes. REUTERS

Medvedev halts Alcaraz winning streak

Daniil Medvedev ended Carlos Alcaraz's perfect start to 2026, stunning the world number one 6-3, 7-6 (7/3) Saturday to book an Indian Wells title clash with Jannik Sinner.

Medvedev avenged losses to Alcaraz in back-to-back Indian Wells finals in 2023 and 2024, using an impressive service display and aggressive play from the baseline to keep the Spanish star on the back foot throughout. "Super happy to beat someone as strong as he (is)," Medvedev said. "It's a great feeling." He'll have his work cut out for

TENNIS

him again in Sunday's clash with four-time Grand Slam champion Sinner, who beat fourth-ranked Alexander Zverev 6-2, 6-4.

Alcaraz, 22, became the youngest man to complete a career Grand Slam with his Australian Open triumph this year. He followed with a title in Qatar and took a 16-0 2026 record into Saturday's contest.

But Medvedev was up to the challenge, last month's Dubai champion running Alcaraz ragged in the intense desert heat as he pushed his own ATP win streak to nine matches. "I just felt like the long rallies, especially when you play against Daniil, that the rallies are long, that you have to increase all the power in almost every shot," Alcaraz said.

AP

BIG WIN: Daniil Medvedev

"So it feels like you're wasting extra energy after every shot. And with the heat, sometimes it's really tricky to deal with all of that."

After Medvedev needed just one break of serve to pocket an opening set in which he didn't face a break point himself, Alcaraz made some adjustments broke first in the second for a 3-1 lead.

But Medvedev broke back immediately, and his control in the rallies had Alcaraz gasping after one long point in the ninth game. Alcaraz hung on to hold serve for a 5-4 lead in the second set, but he was unable to convert a pair of set points in the next game and they went to a tiebreaker that was all Medvedev. "He was playing aggressive, and he didn't even miss," Alcaraz said of Medvedev, who raced to a 6-1 lead in the tiebreaker to book his third shot at the title.

"He's an amazing player with amazing shots, defense, attack, serve, return, everything," Medvedev said. "So you need to be at your best -- and I was."

Medvedev's form, after a disappointing 2025 campaign in which he fell as low as 18th in the world, has caught Sinner's eye.

"He's back to very, very high level, very big serve. He's returning very well, very deep," Sinner said of the 2021 US Open champion.

Sinner was delighted with his play in his sixth straight win over Zverev, the world number four from Germany. "It was a great performance - very solid from the back of the court," said Sinner, who saved the only break point he faced in a commanding display of precision and power. **Results: Men: Semifinals:** 11-Daniil Medvedev (Rus) bt 1-Carlos Alcaraz (Esp) 6-3, 7-6 (7/3); 2-Jannik Sinner (Ita) bt 4-Alexander Zverev (Ger) 6-2, 6-4. AFP

SA ease past Kiwis

A new-look South Africa scythed through New Zealand's batting lineup to comfortably win Sunday's first T20I by seven wickets, with 20 balls to spare.

The visitors' seam attack proved unplayable early on as World Cup finalists New Zealand were reduced to 36-5 before being dismissed for 91 in the 15th over, their 10th lowest total in T20s. South Africa eased to 93-3 in response, with opener Connor Esterhuizen's unbeaten 45

FIRST T20I

off 48 balls ensuring they would claim early honours in the five-match series.

The 24-year-old was one of four South African players making their international debut in any format, alongside Rubin Hermann, Dian Forrester and Nqobani Mokoena. Teenage pace bowler Mokoena impressed with the ball, exploiting unpredictable bounce at Mount Maunganui's Bay Oval to take 3-26 off 3.3 overs.

The 19-year-old ripped through New Zealand's tail to ensure they didn't push their total past 100. Fellow pacemen Gerald Coetzee and Ottneil Baartman took two wickets each for South Africa.

AFP

TOP SHOW: Mokoena

The match came a week after New Zealand were beaten by India in the T20 World Cup final in Ahmedabad.

Only captain Mitchell Santner and allrounder Jimmy Neesham were retained, with most of New Zealand's leading players rested. Santner was the pick of their bowlers, taking 1-8 off four overs while Neesham top-scored with 26 before he was Mokoena's first victim.

Brief scores: New Zealand: 91 all out in 14.3 overs (James Neesham 26; Gerald Coetzee 2-14, Nqobani Mokoena 3-26, Ottneil Baartman 2-22, Keshav Maharaj 2-25) **lost to South Africa 93/3 in 16.4 overs** (Connor Esterhuizen 45 n.o). AFP

B'desh clinch ODI series

Tanzid Hasan struck his maiden ton before Taskin Ahmed took four wickets as Bangladesh pulled off an 11-run victory in the third and final ODI against Pakistan on Sunday to clinch the series 2-1. Salman Agha hit a valiant 106 but it went in vain as Pakistan were bowled out for 279 while chasing Bangladesh's 290 for five at the Sher-e-Bangla National Cricket Stadium.

Tanzid Hasan, named player of the match and series, hit a run-a-ball 107 that included six fours and seven sixes, to help Bangladesh set up a competitive total on board after being put in to bat.

The 25-year-old shared 105 runs for the opening wicket with Saif Hassan, who made 36 off 55 balls before Pakistan captain Shaheen Afridi broke the stand. **Brief scores: Bangladesh: 290/5 in 50 overs** (Saif Hassan 36, Tanzid Hasan 107, Najmul Hossain Shanto 27, Litton Das 41, Towhid Hridoy 48 n.o; Haris Rauf 3-52) **bt Pakistan: 279 all out in 50 overs** (Ghazi Ghori 29, Abdul Samad 34, Salman Agha 106, Saad Masood 38, Shaheen Shah Afridi 37; Taskin Ahmed 4-49, Nahid Rana 2-62, Mustafizur Rahman 3-54). AFP

Ashoka fancied for main event

TIMES NEWS NETWORK

Hyderabad: D Netto-trained Ashoka, who won twice in a row during the monsoon season, is in fine form and should repeat the performance in the Time And Place Plate, the main event of races to be held here on Monday. First race starts at 3pm.

1. Own Opinion Plate 1200M: LA Fleuriere 1, Double Bubble 2

2. Elusive Hero Plate 1400M: Corte Madera 1, Certainty 2

3. Democracy Plate 1600M: Cape May 1, Arizona Sun 2

4. Armagnac Plate 1200M: Tootsie Darling 1, Challenger 2

5. Himalaya Plate 1400M: Twilight King 1, Northern Sky 2

6. Time And Place Plate 1400M: Ashoka 1, Nonpariel 2

7. Bloomer Plate 1200M: Deccan Ranger 1, Always Special 2

Day's best: Cape May. **Double:** LA Fleuriere & Corte Madera. **1st Jackpot:** 2, 3, 4, 6, & 7. **1st Mini jackpot:** 1, 2, 3 & 4. **2nd Mini Jackpot:** 4, 5, 6 & 7. **1st Treble:** 2, 3, & 4. **2nd Treble:** 5, 6, & 7.

KINGS GAMBIT PREVAILS

Pesi Shroff-trained Kings Gambit — ridden by A Prakash — won the CN Wadia Gold Cup, the feature event of the Mumbai races on Sunday.

Purushotham claims gold with PB

Hassan Athlete Narrowly Misses Asiad Qualification

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Bengaluru: Karnataka's Purushotham narrowly missed the Asian Games qualification mark as he won the gold in the 5th Indian Open Jumps Competition, which concluded here on Sunday.

The 24-year-old, from Hassan, produced a personal best effort of 7.87m to climb to the top step of the podium at the Anju Bobby Foundation. Odisha's Sarun Payasingh

ATHLETICS

(7.78m) and Tamil Nadu's Saran S (7.77) took the silver and bronze, respectively. It was the Karnataka athlete's first big performance after he recovered from a ligament tear suffered in the run-up to the World University Games.

"My previous best was 7.59m at the Open Nationals in Bengaluru in 2023. I give credit to my coach Benny Thomas for helping me improve my personal best from 2023," Purushotham told TOI here. "During the qualification round, I checked a lot during my run-up. So today I increased my run-up by a metre, and it made the difference" he added. But he missed the Asiad qualification mark set at 7.91m.

WINNERS: Mubassina Mohammed and Purushotham (right)

The women's long jump title went to the hosts as Mubassina Mohammed of Anju Bobby Sports Foundation leapt to a personal best of 6.38m on her last attempt.

Railway Sports Promotion Board's Bhavani Yadav took the silver with a best of 6.27m which also came on her sixth and last attempt. Mubassina's teammate Kusuma Ravada settled for the bronze with a day's best of 6.08m. "She was eyeing the Asiad qualification mark, but she missed it today. I'm hopeful that she will reach the mark at the Indian GP to be held at the Sree Kanteerava stadium next month," Mubassina's coach Robert Bobby George said.

Results: Men: Long jump: 1. Purushotham (Kar, 7.87m), 2. Sarun Payasingh (Odi, 7.78), 3. Saran S (TN, 7.77). **Women: Long jump:** 1. Mubassina Mohammed (ABSF, 6.38m), 2. Bhavani Yadav (RSPB, 6.27), 3. Kusuma Ravada (ABSF, 6.08). **Pole vault:** 1. Baranica Elangovan (TN, 4.1m), 2. Sindhushree G (NCOE B'luru, 3.95), 3. Babita Patel (CISF, 3.9). **High jump:** 1. Pooja (JSW, 1.76m), 2. Kevinaa Annavi (RSPB, 1.74), 3. Pallavi Patil (RSPB, 1.71). **Karnataka medallists: Men: U-18 Long jump:** 3. Aaron S (6.89m), **Women: U-20 Triple jump:** 1. Nithya Sree V (12m), U-18 Long jump: 3. Sakshi Christina K (5.34m).

NEUFC battle past Jamshedpur

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NorthEast United looked to have missed star striker Alaaeddine Ajaraie in their first four Indian Super League (ISL) clashes this season.

But on Sunday, NEUFC changed the disappointing course, thanks to Andy Rodriguez who finished with a brace against Jamshedpur FC at the Indira Gandhi Athletic Stadium in Guwahati.

ISL

While the opener from the Spaniard was a sublime free-kick in the 53rd minute, Rodriguez's piledriver from outside the box in the 69th minute proved decisive as NEUFC won 2-1, their first win of the season.

The Highlanders also ended Jamshedpur's four-match winning run and a chance to move to the top of the table by exploiting leaders Mohun Bagan's draw on Saturday. Owen Coyle's side stayed second with 12 points from five games, a point behind Bagan. NorthEast, on the other hand, jumped three rungs to seventh on the table, with their first victory and six points from five matches.

PTI

NEUFC and Jamshedpur players in action on Sunday

Coyle did not have his creative midfielder Madih Talal, who had made a big contribution in their performances so far, due to an injury. Yet, Jamshedpur enjoyed the lion's share of possession and looked to be in control compared to NEUFC, who depended more on counterattacks to find a breakthrough. The best chance in the opening half fell to the visitors when Mesi Bouli failed to get his head to a cross in front of goal from Mohammed Sanan.

With the score goalless at change of ends, it was a little after the break that NEUFC won a free-kick around 25 yards from the box and Rodriguez bounced in a brilliant shot into the right corner, away from the outstretched hand of goalkeeper Albino Gomes. A foul on Bouli earned Jamshedpur a penalty in the 68th minute and the Cameroonian sent goalkeeper Gurmeet Singh the other way to draw level.

However, the joy of the equaliser was short lived as the ball fell in the way of Rodriguez during an NEUFC run near the box and he sent in a volley to give his team the lead again. Jamshedpur pressed hard for the equaliser, but it was not to be as they endured their first loss of the season. **Results:** NorthEast United 2 (Andy Rodriguez 53, 69) bt Jamshedpur FC 1 (Raphael Messi Bouli 68-pen); Inter Kashi 1 (Rohit Danu 51) lost to Mumbai City FC 2 (Noufal PN 45+6, Lallianzuala Chhangte 52).

Today's match: Punjab FC vs FC Goa (7.30pm). Live, Sony Sports

Gulveer ends third in NYC Half Marathon

New Delhi: Star Indian distance runner Gulveer Singh added another milestone to his career by finishing third at the globally renowned New York City Half Marathon, an event that attracts some of the world's best long-distance runners.

IN FOCUS

The 27-year-old Army runner clocked 59 minutes 42 seconds to finish behind South Africa's Adriaan Wildschutt, who clinched the top spot with a time of 59:30, while Morocco-born American long-distance runner Zouhair Talbi finished second in 59:41. Gulveer's time, though faster than the national record of 1:00:30 set by steeplechase specialist Avinash Sable at the Delhi Half Marathon in 2020, will not be recognised as an national reord as the New York City Half Marathon course is not record-eligible.

Getty Images

FINE SHOW: Gulveer Singh

The NYC event is run on a point-to-point course in which the start and finish are separated by a distance greater than the limit permitted for record purposes – about 11.6km apart compared to the maximum allowed 10.55km – thereby breaching World Athletics regulations for record-eligible courses.

However, the times are still considered valid for purposes such as personal best and performance rankings even though they are not eligible for record recognition under World Athletics rules. PTI

Diksha finishes tied 45th

Diksha Dagar finished as the top Indian at the Women's Australian Open with a Tied 45th place after carding two-over 72 on the final day. Of the other Indian women in the field Avani Prashanth (74) was T-49 and Vani Kapoor (80)

GOLF ROUND-UP

was 66th. Avani had rounds of 77-72-72-74 for a 7-over total of 295 while Vani carded 72-74-80-80 and a total of 306. Hannah Green became the first Australian since 2014 to win her country's National Open since 2014.

Talwar triumphs: Saptak Talwar won the DP World PGTI's Indorama Ventures Open by two shots after a solid final-round performance of two-under 70, in Ahmedabad on Sunday. The 27-year-old Saptak (68-71-69-70), the overnight joint leader, totalled 10-under 278 for the week. Talwar's second professional win earned him a prize money of $48,000 (Rs. 43,20,000) that propelled him from 44th place to first position in the PGTI Order of Merit. Austria's Christoph Bleier (69-70-72-69), who was overnight tied seventh and three off the lead, came up with a last round of three-under 69 to finish runner-up at eight-under 280.

Getty Images

Theegala back in top 10: Indian American Sahith Theegala carded a solid four-under 68 to move back into the top 10 with one round left to play at the USD 25million Players Championship. Theegala had six birdies against two bogeys in his 68 that took his total score to seven-under par. He is six shots behind Sweden's Ludvig Aberg, who extended lead to three shots after carding one-under 71. AGENCIES

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THE TIMES OF INDIA

INCLUDES 6 PAGES OF BANGALORE TIMES AND *4 PAGES OF EDUCATION TIMES (*CITY AREAS ONLY)

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Mayawati says govt must confer Bharat Ratna on BSP founder Kanshi Ram. Rahul Gandhi writes to PM, Akhilesh too backs demand

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PARAMOUNT DECLINES SCREENWRITER MAX LANDIS' PITCH FOR NEW 'G.I. JOE' FILM FOR CREATIVE REASONS

TIMES GLOBAL

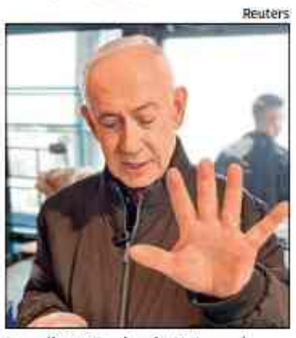
THE TIMES OF INDIA, BENGALURU | MONDAY, MARCH 16, 2026

CAMPING IS NATURE'S WAY OF PROMOTING THE MOTEL BUSINESS
— DAVE BARRY

CAMERON DIAZ SPOTTED IN NEW YORK AS SHE FILMS AN UNTITLED ROM-COM DIRECTED BY STEPHEN MERCHANT

Israel PM mocks rumours about his death as IRGC vows to kill him

Reuters



Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu shows his hand as he speaks at a cafe in Jerusalem on Sunday

Jerusalem: Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu published a short video on Sunday making light of rumours on social media that he was dead.

"I'm dead for coffee," he said sarcastically on his official X account as he received a steaming cup at a cafe outside Jerusalem, employing a colloquial Hebrew expression meaning to love something to death.

Netanyahu raised his hands to the camera, asking, "Do you want to count the number of fingers?" — a reference to speculation on social media that his latest televised address was AI-generated as he appeared to have six fingers on one hand. "We are doing things that I cannot share at this moment, but we are striking Iran and LEbanon very hard," he added.

Meanwhile, Israel has approved an $827million emergency budget for military purchases, media reported Sunday.

Iran's Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) threatened on Sunday to kill Netanyahu. "IRGC vows to pursue and kill 'child-killer' Netanyahu if he is still alive," Iran's IRNA news agency said in a post on X.

12 medics killed: WHO chief

Director General of the WHO Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, has confirmed the deaths of 12 health workers in southern Lebanon describing the events as a "tragic development in the escalating Middle East (West Asia) crisis." Lebanon confirmed the victims were on duty at the facility. AGENCIES

Dozens arrested in Iran over 'links' with Israel: Media

Tehran: Iranian authorities have arrested dozens across the country on suspicion of cooperating with Israel, local media reported on Sunday. "Twenty people were arrested and detained" after they were found to be "sending details of military, law enforcement and security locations to the Zionist enemy," the Fars news agency said, quoting provincial prosecutor Hossein Majidi.

Those arrests took place during raids on networks linked to Israel in West Azerbaijan province, it added.

At least 18 people were also arrested over "sending images of locations bombed by Israel and the US" and other sites to the London-based TV channel Iran International, the Tasnim news agency said, quoting the intelligence ministry.

In Jan, Iran banned cooperation with Iran International, saying it was "affiliated with the Zionist regime". AFP

No commitments from countries on Trump's call to send warships

Iran Confirms Military Control Over Hormuz, Dismisses Talks With US

Cairo: US President Donald Trump's appeal to China, France, Japan, South Korea, Britain and others to send warships to keep the Strait of Hormuz "open and safe" brought no commitments on Sunday as oil prices soar during the Iran war. US energy secretary Chris Wright told NBC he has been "in dialogue" with some of the countries, and said he expected China "will be a constructive partner" in reopening the strait through which one-fifth of global oil exports normally pass.

Iran's foreign minister Abbas Araghchi told CBS that Tehran has been "approached by a number of countries" seeking safe passage for their vessels, "and this is up to our military to decide." He said a group of vessels from "different countries" had been allowed to pass, without giving details.

Iran has said the strait is open to all except the US and its allies. "We don't see any reason why we should talk with Americans" about finding a way to end the war, Araghchi added, noting that Israel and the US started the fighting with coordinated attacks on Feb 28 during indirect US-Iran talks.

AFP

Iranian workers clear the debris from a building in Tehran on Sunday

"We are intensively looking with our allies at what can be done, because it's so important that we get the strait reopened," UK energy secretary Ed Miliband told Sky News, adding that ending the war is the "best and surest" way to do it. South Korea's foreign ministry said it "takes note" of Trump's call and that it "will coordinate and carefully review" the situation with the US.

A spokesperson for China's embassy to the US, Liu Pengyu, said "all parties have the responsibility to ensure unimpeded energy supply" and that China would "strengthen communication with relevant parties" for de-escalation.

Emergency oil stocks "will soon start flowing to global markets," the International Energy Agency said Sunday, describing the collective action to lower prices "by far the largest ever." It updated last week's announcement of 400 million barrels to 412 million.

US ambassador to UN Mike Waltz was asked Sunday whether the US president was prepared to target oil facilities on Kharg island. "President Trump's not going to take any options off the table," Waltz said. US Central Command said Saturday that it had struck military targets on the island, but preserved oil infrastructure.

Gulf Arab states on Sunday reported new missile and drone attacks a day after Iran called for the evacuation of three major ports in the UAE. Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and the UAE said they were working to intercept projectiles.

Italy's chief of defence staff Gen. Luciano Portolano said the country's military base in Kuwait was attacked on Sunday. No Italian personnel were injured, he said.

Egypt's President Abdel Fattah el-Sissi made a series of phone calls Sunday, speaking with Qatari Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani; Jordanian King Abdullah II; and UAE President Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan. Egypt's foreign minister is touring the Gulf region. El-Sissi said in a statement that Egypt is intensifying efforts seeking a de-escalation of tensions in the region. AP

Why little was done to head off oil's Strait of Hormuz problem

IMPORTANCE OF PORT OF FUJAIRAH FOR THE OIL MARKET

Oil loading operations at the UAE's Fujairah emirate have resumed after a drone attack on Saturday

Why does Fujairah matter?

- Fujairah exported more than 1.7 million barrels per day (bpd) of crude oil and refined fuels on average last year, according to Kpler data, which equals 1.7% of daily world demand

- The port is located on the Gulf of Oman, approximately 70 nautical miles from the Strait of Hormuz, which increases its significance
- It sold 7.4 million cubic metres (about 7.33 million metric tons) of marine fuels in 2025, making it the fourth largest in the world after Singapore, Rotterdam in the Netherlands, and China's Zhoushan

Smoke and fire rise after debris from an intercepted Iranian drone struck an oil facility in Fujairah

Why it matters to the UAE?

The UAE, which before the war began produced more than 3.4 million bpd of crude, operates a 1.5 million bpd pipeline that can transport some crude to bypass the Strait of Hormuz

The Abu Dhabi Crude Oil Pipeline, also known as the Habshan-Fujairah Pipeline, transports oil from Abu Dhabi's fields to Fujairah which majorly caters to Asia

Why does it matter to crude and oil markets?

The port has a storage capacity of 18 million cubic metres, making it one of the world's top hubs for storing crude and fuels as well as blending operations

Blending in the oil industry is the process of mixing different petroleum components to create finished products such as gasoline and bunker fuels

The Fujairah Oil Industry Zone hosts West Asia's largest commercial storage capacity for refined products

Source: Reuters and AP

Kharg Island: Iran's oil hub in the crosshairs

Atul Mathur & Dipak Dash | TNN

New Delhi: US airstrikes on Kharg Island, the nerve centre of Iran's oil export network, have sharply escalated tensions in West Asia and raised fears of further disruption in global energy supplies. While Iran claimed that oil operations on the island continued despite the attack, it warned that retaliation could target US assets and shipping routes across the Gulf.

The focus on Kharg Island underscores its strategic importance. Located about 25 km off Iran's southern coast in the northern Persian Gulf, the small coral island serves as the country's primary oil export hub. Nearly 90% of Iran's crude exports pass through its terminals, making it one of the most critical pieces of energy infrastructure in the region.

The oil export terminal on Kharg Island was developed in the 1960s in partnership with the US oil company Amoco. Following the 1979 Iranian revolution, Iran expropriated the company's assets and took control of the facilities. Amoco later merged with BP, which still uses the Amoco retail fuel brand in the US.

Reuters

A worker fills a car's tank at a fuel station, next to a pump with a sign that reads 'empty', as fuel purchases are limited per vehicle in Bangkok on Sunday

Over the decades, Iran has built an extensive pipeline network connecting major inland oil fields to the island, turning it into the main collection, storage and loading hub for crude before it is shipped to international buyers. Kharg's facilities also receive crude from major offshore oilfields such as Aboozar, Forouzan and Dorood through subsea pipelines. The oil is stored in large tank farms and loaded onto supertankers headed mainly for Asian markets.

Energy analysts say much of Iran's coastline is too shallow for these large vessels, making Kharg uniquely suited for large-scale crude exports. Because of this concentration of export infrastructure, the island has long been viewed as both Iran's greatest energy asset and its most vulnerable chokepoint. Any major disruption there could remove a significant volume of crude from global markets and send oil prices spiralling.

"Kharg Island has storage capacity of roughly 30 million barrels and serves as the primary export outlet for Iranian crude. Around 90-95% of Iran's seaborne crude exports typically originate from this single island, meaning roughly 1.5-1.6 million barrels per day pass through its terminals. These exports are a critical source of foreign currency for Iran and remain a central pillar of govt revenues and economic stability despite years of sanctions," said Sumit Ritolia, lead research analyst at Kpler, a global data and analytics provider.

Ritolia said Iran has tried to develop alternative export routes such as the Jask terminal outside the Strait of Hormuz, but these facilities are smaller and cannot replace Kharg's capacity. Any sustained disruption from military escalation could immediately threaten most of Iran's export capacity.

Prashant Vashisht, senior vice president at ratings agency ICRA, said even after the start of the conflict Iran has maintained crude exports of 1.1-1.5 mbd. Any attack at Kharg Island could further affect crude supply, he said.

Rebecca F Elliott & Vivian Nereim

Of all the risks the global energy system has long faced, none was bigger or better known than the potential closure of the Strait of Hormuz. The narrow passageway out of the Persian Gulf is both vital — serving as the only gateway to the rest of the world for huge amounts of oil and natural gas — and extremely vulnerable to attacks. But despite being widely recognised as a potential choke point, the strait remains the only way to export most of the energy produced in the region.

The reason there is no true alternative comes down to a combination of geography, political tensions and economic competition among the region's oil powers. There have been efforts to circumvent the strait, notably by Saudi Arabia and the UAE. But the pipelines through those countries can carry only a small fraction of the energy produced in the Persian Gulf.

For many other energy-producing countries in the region, the only way to avoid the strait would be to lay a pipeline across a neighbouring country — an expensive and politically fraught endeavour. Take Qatar, one of the world's biggest natural gas exporters. Its only land border is with Saudi Arabia — a country that cut off diplomatic ties and closed that border during a regional spat resolved five years ago. Plus, any pipeline would be vulnerable to Iranian attacks.

"There's nothing which is totally secure here," said John Browne, a former chief executive of the London-based oil giant BP. "In the end, someone with bad intention can do all sorts of things to oil and gas infrastructure."

Some oil analysts also assumed that, if the time came, the US, which has a keen interest in keeping energy markets stable, would use its military might to keep the strait passable. "There always has been the nightmare scenario, but it seemed to be a scenario that was not very likely," said Daniel Yergin, a Pulitzer Prize-winning energy historian and vice chairman of the research firm S&P Global. "The diversification or security came from the fact that the consumers would be there to protect the oil."

But in this case, the US, acting with Israel, instigated the conflict by attacking Iran. While President Trump has floated the possibility of providing US naval escorts for oil and gas tankers, he has not followed through, so far.

The six fossil-fuel-rich countries of the Gulf — Saudi Arabia, the Emirates, Kuwait, Qatar, Oman and Bahrain — belong to a loose union called the Gulf Cooperation Council, but cooperation is often lacking. Leaders have talked about building a unified passenger and freight rail system for more than a decade to little avail. Building a shared system for exporting energy would be substantially more fraught, and unlikely to surmount political and economic hurdles.

In recent years, Saudi Arabia and the Emirates, the two most powerful countries in the region, have often been at odds, pursuing different oil policies and backing different parties in armed conflicts around the region, including in Yemen, a poor and war-torn country that has a long border with Saudi Arabia and sits at the opening of the Red Sea.

More than a quarter of the oil exported via the Strait of Hormuz in the form of either crude or fuels like diesel is still able to get out, the International Energy Agency (IEA) estimated. That is because the Emirates built a short pipeline from Abu Dhabi to Fujairah that started operating in 2012, circumventing the Strait of Hormuz, though Iran has targeted facilities on both ends.

The biggest alternative is Saudi Arabia's conduit to the Red Sea, which opened in the 1980s during what came to be known as the "tanker wars" between Iran and Iraq. The pipeline can carry up to seven million barrels of oil a day. But with two million barrels headed to refineries within the kingdom, only about five million barrels a day of capacity is available to oil that otherwise would be shipped through the strait, Amin H Nasser, chief executive of Saudi Aramco, said this week. "Immediately, as the Strait of Hormuz developed tension, we ramped up production through the East-West pipeline," he said.

Even if the war ends with a severely weakened Iran, insurgents could emerge to attack shipping through the strait. Yemen's Iranian-backed Houthi militia has done just that in the Red Sea over the past few years. At relatively little expense, the group was able to significantly disrupt global shipping through that passage to the Mediterranean Sea via the Suez Canal.

How countries respond to the "nightmare scenario" of a near-closure of the Strait of Hormuz, as Yergin put it — including whether they build more pipelines — will depend on how long the waterway remains impassable. Even once the strait becomes safe to sail again, it is likely to take weeks for oil production to reach pre-war levels, IEA has said. NYT

Want money, tech in return for drone help, says Ukraine

Kyiv: Ukraine wants money and technology in return for helping West Asia that have sought its expertise as they defend against Iranian kamikaze drones, its President **Volodymyr Zelensky** said, after Kyiv sent specialists to the region.

Zelensky told reporters that three teams were sent to West Asia to conduct expert assessments and demonstrate how drone defences should operate. Earlier this week he said teams were sent to Qatar, the UAE and Saudi Arabia, as well as a US military base in Jordan. "This is not about being involved in operations. We are not at war with Iran," Zelensky said.

He said that more fundamental, long-term drone deals could be negotiated with Gulf countries and what Ukraine will get in return for the assistance still needed to be discussed. "For us today, both the technology and the funding are important," Zelensky said.

'Russia supplying drones to Iran'

Russia is supplying Iran with Shahed drones, Zelensky told CNN in an interview aired on Saturday.Shahed drones have been linked to other attacks on countries in the region, although their manufacturers are not always clear. REUTERS

Iran urges countries to avoid action that could widen war

Tehran: Iran's foreign minister **Abbas Araghchi** urged other countries on Sunday to refrain from any action that could widen the scope of the war.

In a telephonic conversation with French foreign minister Jean-Noel Barrot, Araghchi called on other countries to "refrain from any action that could lead to escalation and expansion of the conflict", according to an Iranian foreign ministry statement.

His remarks came after US President Donald Trump called for other nations' warships to help protect world oil supplies passing through the Strait of Hormuz.

Swiss govt rejects two flyover requests from US, permits three others

The Swiss govt said on Saturday that it discussed requests by US military and official aircraft to fly over the country, and based on its law of neutrality, rejected two Iran-related war flights but permitted three others. "The law on neutrality prohibits overflights by parties to the conflict that serve a military purpose related to the conflict. Permitted are humanitarian and medical transits, including the transport of wounded persons, as well as overflights that are unrelated to the conflict," govt said. AGENCIES

Pak says it hit 'militant hideouts' in Kandahar

Islamabad: Pakistan said Sunday it targeted militant hideouts in Afghanistan's Kandahar region overnight, as the fighting that erupted between the two neighbours late last month showed no signs of abating. In a post on X, Pakistan's information minister Attaullah Tarar said the military had struck equipment storage facilities and "technical support infrastructure" in overnight attacks in Kandahar.

Afghan govt spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid said Pakistan had hit two locations: a site used by security guards during the day that was empty at night, and a drug rehabilitation centre that suffered slight damage. He said there were no casualties, but that the strikes showed that Pakistan was "continuing to invade and fuel the fire of war."

Afghanistan's defence ministry said it carried out an attack on a Pakistani army camp in Pakistan's South Waziristan area on Sunday in retaliation for the strikes in Kandahar. It claimed the attack destroyed most of the camp's command centre and other facilities, and inflicted heavy casualties on the Pakistani military.

AFP

A house damaged in Pakistan's strikes in Afghanistan's Kandahar region on Sunday

4 brothers killed in Pak

Four brothers were killed on Sunday when a bullet allegedly fired from the Afghan side struck near a house in Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, police said. Pakistan's President Asif Ali Zardari on Saturday said Afghanistan's govt had " crossed a red line " by launching drone attacks on civilian areas. AGENCIES

Israeli group behind mysterious flights from Gaza taking Palestinians to South Africa and Indonesia

The plane carrying about 150 Palestinians from Gaza came as a surprise to everyone on the ground when it landed in South Africa in Nov. Since May, at least three flights filled with Gaza residents who'd signed up to leave the war-torn enclave have landed in Indonesia and South Africa.

An Israeli group whose founder adamantly supported US President Donald Trump's proposal to resettle Palestinians from Gaza is behind the flights, an AP investigation has found, raising further questions about the motives behind the evacuation of hundreds of people from the strip.

At the time, South African foreign minister Ronald Lamola called the flights a "clear agenda to cleanse out the Palestinians out of Gaza and the West Bank."

Ad Kan, an Israeli organisation founded by soldiers and former intelligence officers, worked via another company to distance links to Israel and organise the flights, according to a contract, passenger lists, text messages, financial statements, and interviews with more than two dozen Israelis, Palestinians and other people involved with the trips.

AP

A Palestinian man who travelled to South Africa via a charter flight shows his boarding passes

Several of the passengers said they didn't know who was behind the trip. But they largely didn't care, they said, as long as they could leave. "There was famine, and we had no options. My children were almost killed," said a 37-year-old Palestinian who arrived in South Africa in Nov and, like the other passengers, spoke on condition of anonymity. Ad Kan kept a distance from the flights. The evacuations were organised through a company called Al-Majd, which describes itself as a humanitarian organisation "supporting Palestinian lives".

However, a look at the history of Ad Kan and its founder, Gilad Ach, suggests the Israeli group may have been driven, at least in part, by a different agenda. "Ad Kan," Hebrew for "enough is enough," has for years worked covertly to infiltrate groups and expose what they say are antisemitic or anti-Israel activities.

Ach, an Israeli combat reservist, is a West Bank settler activist who was a staunch supporter of Trump's proposal last year to transfer 2 million Palestinians out of Gaza. Trump later abandoned his plan — which drew widespread international condemnation and accusations from Palestinians, rights groups and even the U.N. secretary-general that such a proposal could amount to "ethnic cleansing" — and said Palestinians could remain in Gaza.

But far-right Israeli groups, including members of governing coalition, continue to support the idea of removing Gaza's Palestinians. With the knowledge of the US, Israel's govt has approached several govts — Somaliland, South Sudan and Sudan — in hopes of facilitating emigration from Gaza.

Ach declined to be interviewed for this story and said in a text message that he was proud to lead organisations voicing support for the rights of Palestinians in Gaza who want to leave for safer parts of the world, free from Hamas.

Families who flew to South Africa said they weren't aware that Israelis were behind the flights but it didn't matter. "I agreed to the flight, and I didn't know the destination," said a Palestinian who used Al-Majd to send his wife and son to South Africa. "All I cared about was getting my family out of Gaza." AP

WORLD DIGEST

Counterespionage thriller first Chinese movie backed by its intelligence agency

Dodging glass-walled skyscrapers, a drone joined a high-octane chase as a spy tried to evade the agents in pursuit. In moments, the unmanned aircraft knocks him down. The drama happened in China's southern city of Shenzhen. But it was not real. It was one of the scenes from "Scare Out," a recently released Chinese movie that marks the first motion picture to be endorsed by China's secretive and powerful ministry of state security. A movie about a mole inside an intelligence agency is not new in many countries, but it is in China, where the authorities are used to keeping strict control over what is shared. Directed by Oscar-nominated Zhang Yimou, "Scare Out" has been presented as "led and created" by the MSS, which hopes the movie will also help people to defend the country from any threats. It opened in theatres on Feb 17, Chinese New Year's Day. MSS, said ithe film aims to "strengthen the people's defence line" and "echo the needs of the times of national security education."

'Israeli forces kill 16 people in Gaza and the West Bank'

Israeli forces killed 16 Palestinians in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, health officials said. Medics and the interior ministry of the Hamas-run Gaza said an Israeli airstrike killed a senior police official and eight other officers when it hit their vehicle in the central Gaza Strip. Earlier on Sunday, health officials said an Israeli airstrike had killed three people of a family in central Gaza.

US airline CEOs urge Congress to end stand-off

The CEOs of US airlines urged Congress Sunday to move quickly to end a 29-day partial govt shutdown that has forced 50,000 airport security officers to work without pay. Absences by Transportation Security Administration officers have already disrupted travel at major airports over the last week, raising alarm as the busy spring travel season continues.

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ELECTION 2026

THE TIMES

INCLUSIVE OF BANGALORE TIMES AND EDUCATION TIMES |

25 Lakh personnel will be deployed to conduct the elections

Total Seats 824

No. Of Polling Booths 2.2 Lakh

TOTAL ELECTORS 17.4 Cr

FIRST-TIME VOTERS 28 Lakh

Summer Of The Satraps: April Sizzler In 4 States

Bengal Phases Cut From 8 To 2; Others Vote At One Shot; Results On May 4

Bharti.Jain@timesofindia.com

New Delhi: Election Commission on Sunday announced three-phased assembly polls across Assam, Kerala, Puducherry, Tamil Nadu and Bengal between April 9 and 29, with counting of votes scheduled for May 4. Bengal will vote on April 23 and 29, making it the shortest exercise in a state with a history of political violence. Kerala, Assam, Puducherry and Tamil Nadu will vote in a single phase — the first three on April 9 and TN on April 23.

FULL COVERAGE: BACK OF FLAP, P 9-11

▶ **Didi races poll clock for DA sops, See Front Page**

POLL SCHEDULE

Polling Dates	States (Seats)
April 9, 2026	Assam (126), Kerala (140), P'cherry (30)
April 23	Bengal (152), Tamil Nadu (234)
April 29	Bengal (142)
May 4	Counting of votes & results

CEC Gyanesh Kumar's announcement paves the way for another high-stakes contest between BJP and regional heavyweights who are members of INDIA bloc but will be pitted against each other in different theatres.

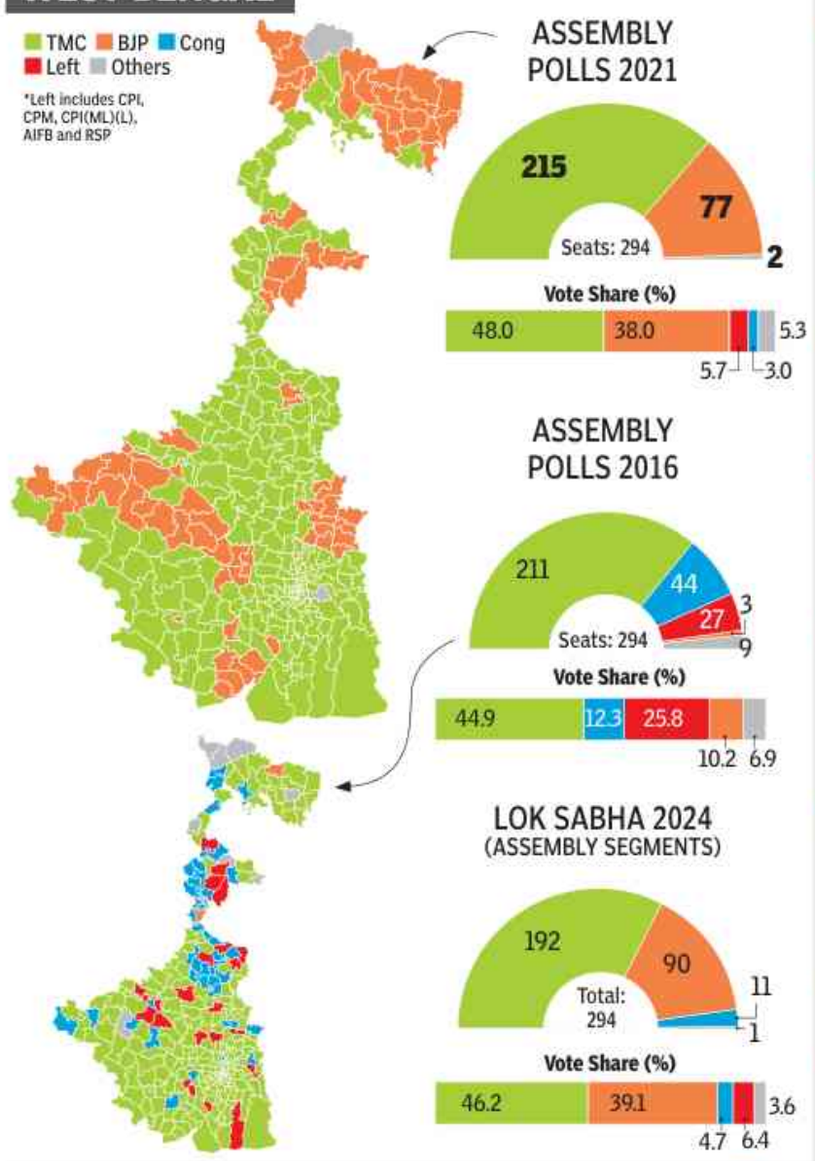
Attention will be in particular on Mamata Banerjee in Bengal and M K Stalin in TN, though the battles in Kerala and Assam — involving Pinarayi Vijayan and Himanta Biswa Sarma — are set to be no less intense. Though being fought in different arenas and featuring different actors, the battles will have the issues of BJP's preeminence and its ambition, regional pride versus nationalism, and "secularism" versus "appeasement" as common themes.

BJP will approach the battle as an opportunity to expand its influence in areas which have so far been unfriendly. Stakes for its rivals are higher and the outcome will also have a bearing on the standings within the INDIA bloc.

In Bengal, it will be another contest between the tenacity of CM Mamata Banerjee, who is assured of a near-total backing of Muslims — comprising one-third of the state's electorate — and enjoys significant support among others, and a BJP which has consolidated itself as the principal challenger, but has struggled to build upon its initial breakthrough.

▶ **ADMK, BJP joint fight, P 9**

WEST BENGAL



TRINAMOOL CONGRESS

Strength: Mamata Banerjee can count on her huge statewide popularity, especially with women voters. TMC's deep ground presence and the potential to frame the election as a 'state vs Centre' contest can create traction among voters.

Weakness: Anti-incumbency of being 15 years in office and allegations of corruption (e.g. teacher recruitment scam) and misgovernance are a worry along with high-profile crime cases like the RG Kar rape-murder. All this can also affect cadre morale.

Opportunity: Welfare schemes like Lakshmir Bhandar, Swasthya Sathi, Yuva Sathi remain mass anchors. Anger over special intensive revision (SIR) of electoral rolls can be used to mobilise voters.

Threat: SIR can prune parts of TMC's core base, leading to a shift in seat-level arithmetic. TMC will also have to contend with the BJP campaign machinery led by its vote-magnet, PM Narendra Modi.

BJP

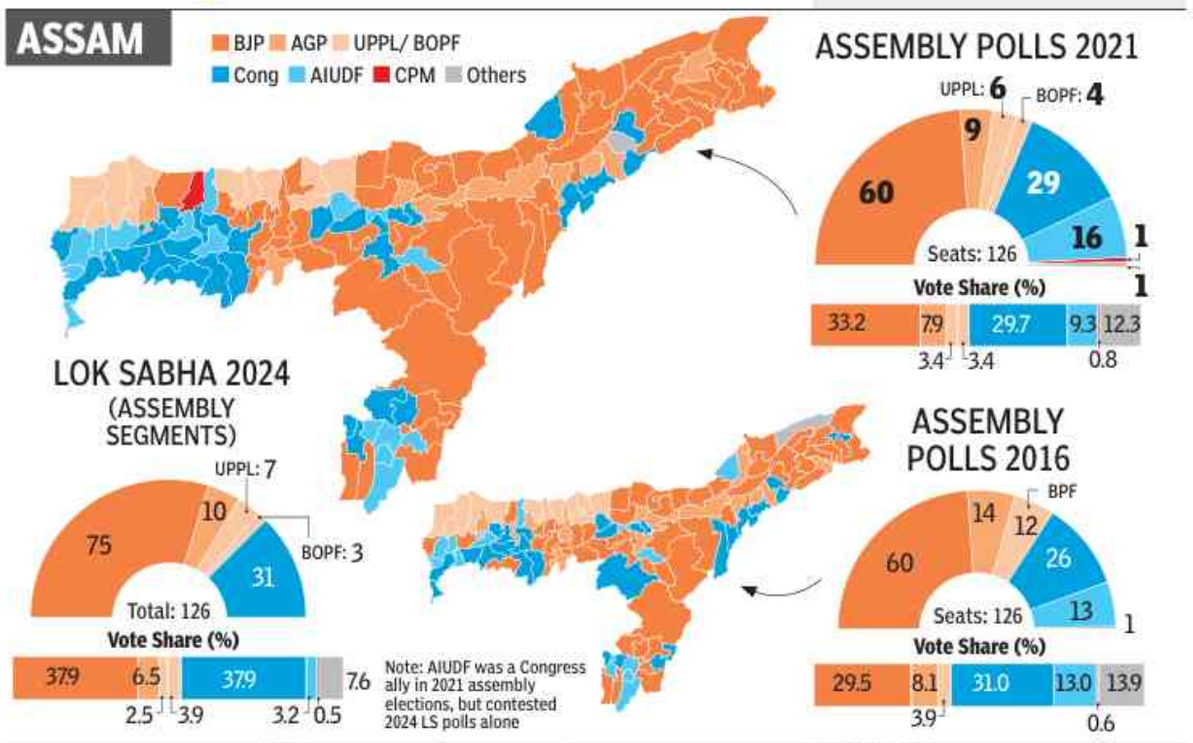
Strength: The party will look to build on gains from 2021 elections, when it emerged as the main opposition. It can highlight its 'double engine' message and use its small, but active, supporter base to amplify anti-govt agitations (teachers, ASHA workers, etc).

Weakness: BJP's Bengal unit is still missing a leader who can directly challenge Mamata on popularity. Efforts to build a cadre base have sputtered, leading to weaker last-mile penetration than TMC, and over-reliance on central leadership for momentum.

Opportunity: SIR may open seats earlier seen as out of reach while strong border-belt footprint can be leveraged for gains.

Threat: SIR backlash in BJP pockets (Matua belt, Rajbanshi areas) could affect tally. Few local names who can match Trinamool leaders on popularity.

ASSAM



Note: AIUDF was a Congress ally in 2021 assembly elections, but contested 2024 LS polls alone

NDA

Strength: BJP has built up a strong cadre, organisational base while alliances (with AGP, BPF, RHJM) broaden regional and tribal reach. Development-plus-governance pitch under Modi and CM Himanta Biswa Sarma based on welfarism, infra push, and anti-encroachment drive.

Weakness: The anti-incumbency of two terms in office. Rising ethnic and cultural tensions could erode support in sensitive constituencies.

Opportunity: It can hope for traction from direct welfare transfers to women and students. Sarma has helped the alliance position itself as the "protector of Assamese identity", backing a strong anti-infiltration stand.

Threat: Possible vote consolidation depending on how Congress works out its alliance arithmetics. Issues over seat-sharing arrangements with alliance partners can affect mobilisation on the ground and lead, in some cases, to 'friendly contests' that could queer the pitch. Chance of resentment among voters over land eviction/ citizenship issues and tensions around ethnic, and cultural polarisation.

CONGRESS

Strength: Legacy footprint and organisational memory as a party that long held office in state. Pull among minorities and tea-garden workers.

Weakness: Attrition and lack of recent success has weakened state leadership, forcing it to form an alliance with likes of AJP, CPI, CPI(ML), which limits its electoral reach.

Opportunity: Anti-incumbency against BJP and scope to build on 2024 LS poll gains.

Threat: Fragmented opposition can splinter anti-BJP vote. Perception that Congress's "soft on infiltrators" undermines appeal on a key issue.

ALL-INDIA UNITED DEMOCRATIC FRONT (AIUDF)

Strength: Concentrated and dedicated Muslim minority base in lower Assam (e.g., Dhubri, Barpeta belt).

Weakness: "Community-only" image limits expansion. Also, seen as a one-man show, driven by founder Badruddin Ajmal.

Opportunity: Has potential to be kingmaker in a fractured verdict. Can consolidate minority votes if Congress underperforms.

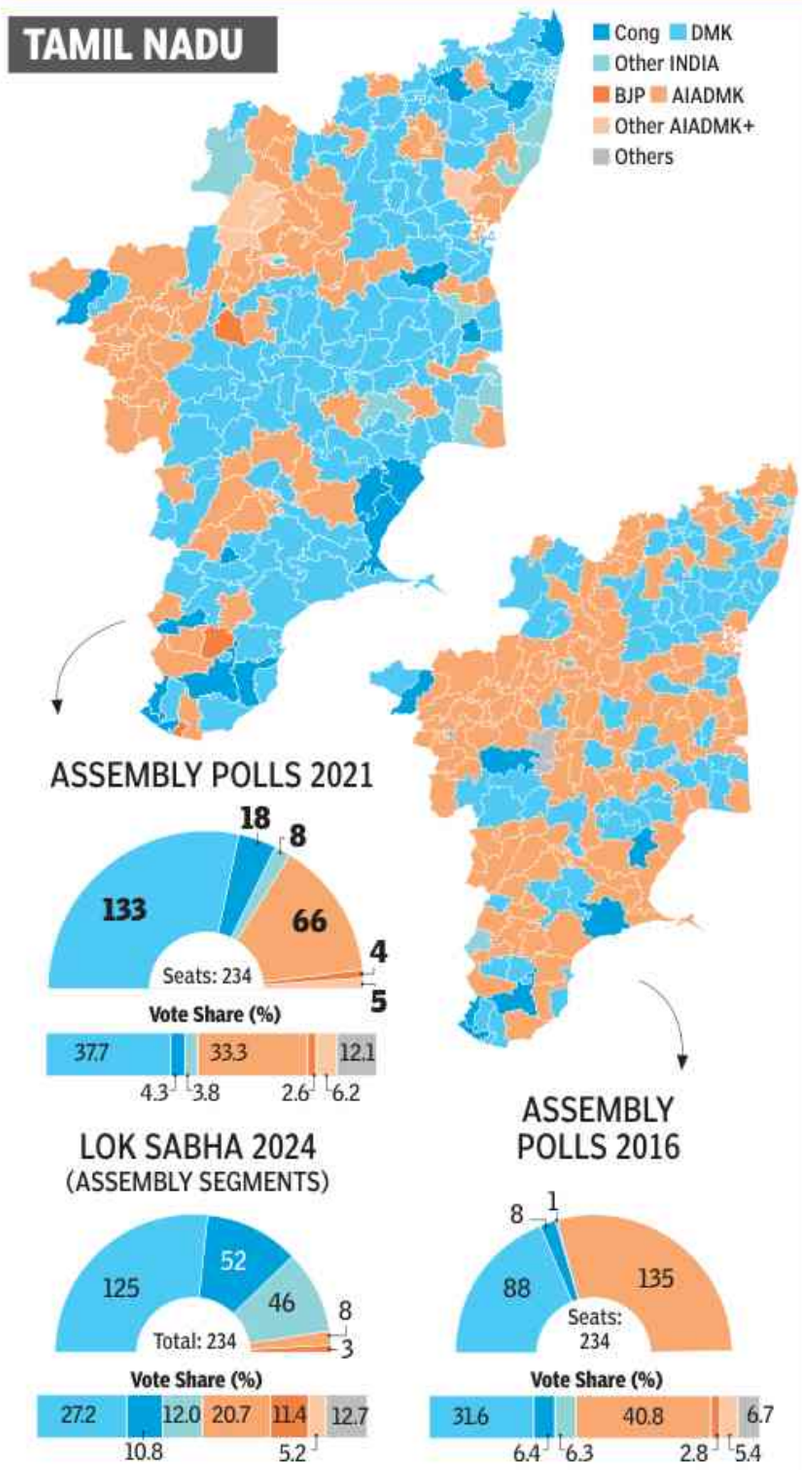
Threat: Risk of marginalisation if kept out of alliances. BJP's anti-infiltrator plank is directly at odds with its base.

INSIDE FLAP: TAMIL NADU, KERALA, AND PUDUCHERRY

DANCE *of* DEMOCRACY

THE TIMES OF INDIA, BENGALURU
MONDAY, MARCH 16, 2026

TAMIL NADU



DMK Front

Strength: DMK has augmented its Secular Progressive Alliance (SPA), bringing in parties like DMDK to beat anti-incumbency and aid in tight contests. It also has strong booth-level presence. Welfare and cash transfers, covering everybody from women to students and gig workers lends goodwill. It can also count on minority support.

Weakness: Corruption allegations against some ministers, anti-incumbency, and perceived wrinkles in alliance over seat-sharing.

Opportunity: Entry of Vijay's TVK could split anti-DMK votes. Can claim to be main custodian of Tamil pride.

Threat: Challenge of winning over young/Gen Z voters. ED scrutiny on senior leaders can disrupt campaign.

AIADMK-BJP Front

Strength: Jayalalithaa is no longer around but her name can still fetch votes even as the party still enjoys residual grassroots and rural base, especially in western TN. BJP tie-up ensures resources and adds national narrative to its campaign.

Weakness: Fragmented Thevar base with Sasikala forming her own party and O Panneerselvam joining DMK. BJP link puts question mark on commitment to Tamil pride.

Opportunity: Anti-incumbency against DMK could consolidate around the main opposition bloc.

Threat: TVK could eat into votes, especially of swing voters and youths drawn to Vijay's star appeal.

Tamilaga Vettri Kazhagam

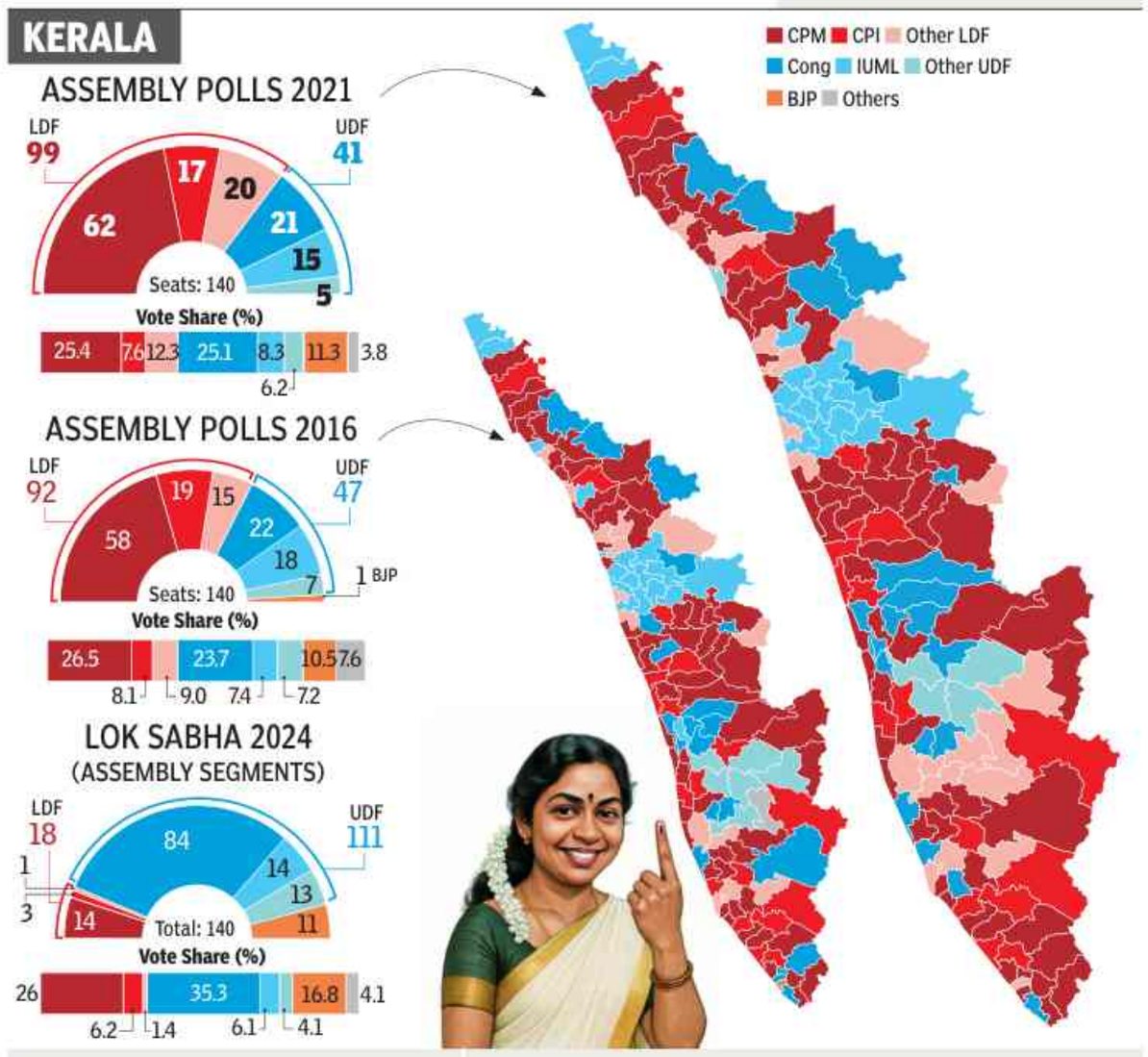
Strength: Vijay's appeal and strong youth connect. Ability to present itself as "third alternative" to attract neutral voters and fence-sitters.

Weakness: Thin organisation and weak booth machinery. Limited experience of second-rung leadership.

Opportunity: Can cash in on dissatisfaction with both DMK and ADMK and woo young voters.

Threat: CBI probe linked to Karur stampede makes for bad optics. Inexperience and rapid scaling pose risks to coordination and credibility.

KERALA



UDF (Congress-Led)

Strength: Stable base in parts of central Kerala. Scope for minority consolidation of Christian and Muslim voters through alliance math. Recent performance in local-body polls comes as a morale booster.

Weakness: Groupism in state unit still a worry. It's missing a mass leader of the late Oommen Chandy's stature. It also has a weaker booth machinery than CPM. Party's poor showing in recent state elections feeds into narrative of "decline". This, in turn, affects credibility and cadre energy.

Opportunity: Anti-incumbency in a state where govt changed every five years. UDF can tap into change sentiment in urban, semi-urban seats and exploit governance controversies and limited results on economy/jobs front. Better coordination among alliance partners on seat-sharing, campaigning can translate into gains.

Threat: LDF's cadre depth and ability to ensure booth-level micro-management. Traction achieved by BJP and NDA can end up splitting the anti-LDF vote in tight contests. Simply relying on anti-incumbency without strong ideological narrative may prove insufficient against ideology-driven rivals.

LDF (CPM-Led)

Strength: Pinarayi Vijayan's appeal and hold on state unit. Disciplined cadre base and booth-level presence that can highlight welfare measures and rally beneficiaries and supporters across socio-cultural groups.

Weakness: Anti-incumbency after two straight terms along with perceived weakening of internal self-correction mechanism. Decline in connect with Left intelligentsia affects narrative focus. Top heavy party with limited public appeal of second-rung leaders.

Opportunity: Lack of focused ground-level strategy among opposition parties. Factionalism and absence of cohesion among opposition ranks. Triangular contests with BJP as third force can benefit LDF arithmetic. Fewer internal fights can ensure proper articulation of governance record.

Threat: Anger over Sabarimala gold-heist allegations and related controversies. Discontent among health staff and slipping of minority support. BJP's ability to carve out a Hindu vote bank.

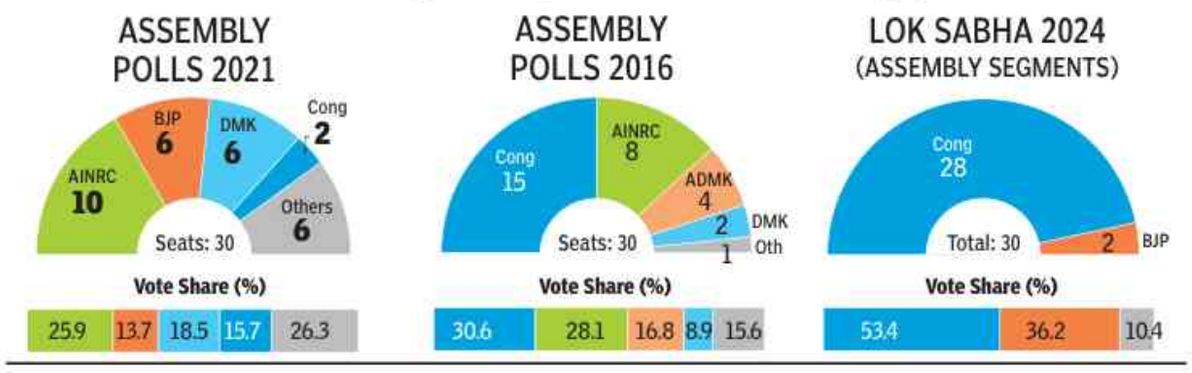
NDA (BJP-Led)

Strength: BJP's sustained efforts to make inroads means it's no longer seen as "untouchable", which is reflected in rising vote share and cadre confidence. NDA has a ready vote-getter in PM Narendra Modi.

Weakness: Converting ground support into votes remains a worry as does weak appeal of state-level leadership.

Opportunity: 'Double engine' plank and stress on Hindu culture and identity. Showing in Lok Sabha polls can be used to build momentum.

Threat: Hard Hindutva rhetoric can trigger backlash in Kerala's social mix. Consolidation of votes behind the traditonal LDF and UDF blocs.

PUDUCHERRY

N Rangasamy, founder and president of AINRC, is looking for his fourth term in office and second in partnership with BJP. However, it hasn't been all smooth sailing for the alliance with the CM making his displeasure felt, reportedly over interference by the LG. PM Modi launched a slew of development projects ahead of polls, but the statehood issue remains a drag on alliance dynamics. While DMK and Congress will be fancying their chances, talk of actor Vijay's TVK seeking an alliance with AINRC has added an intriguing dimension to the contest